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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

APRIL, 1972
VOL. 30, NO. 5

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

DANGER— MICHAEL SHAYNE AT WORK

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Prisoners of a storm, six frightened people kept grim vigil over a dead man, waiting for murder to strike again in the night. Could Mike Shayne, himself marked for death, find and overcome a mad killer—while there was still time to stay alive?

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COMPLETE IN THIS ISSUE

A New MIKE SHAYNE Short Novel

DANGER— MICHAEL SHAYNE AT WORK

by BRETT HALLIDAY

In a house of terror, peopled by storm-prisoned foes, a dead man waited for justice to be done. Could Mike Shayne, himself a target for a mad thing's vengeance, find and deal with a killer in time?

MIKE SHAYNE arrived at the Lake Puntachobee hunting lodge of Florida's Secretary of State Commerce, Buford Whitmire, just before the hurricane hit.

As it was, the red-head detective had been forced to drive from Tallahassee through fifteen miles of solid rain and howling winds, the last five miles treacherous on muddy, winding lanes to the back-country retreat.

Shayne would have preferred to have sat out the hurricane in his second-floor Miami apartment, comfortable and warm, a glass of brandy beside him, but there wasn't any choice; the welfare of the State demanded he take the hazardous journey. Just as Hurricane Clarissa was heading in the direction of the

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lodge, gaining in size and fury, so was the investigation that Shayne had been working on. It was a toss-up to him which devil—man or nature—would produce the worst destruction before the crises passed.

The lodge was a rambling frame house with small-paned dormers. Shayne parked his rented car alongside two other cars and a new pickup-camper, and raced across the short open space to the wide veranda, the black squall slashing at him as he went. The front door was opened by a short, spindly old man with a stoic expression but sharp, expressive eyes.

"Mr. Shayne?" the man yelled over the hammering wind.

"That's right," the detective answered, stepping inside. He shrugged out of his sodden raincoat, dripping water on the carpet. "Some blow out there."

"It'll get worse," the old man observed, taking the coat. "My name's Jenkins. I'm the caretaker and cook here. You'll be wanting to see Mr. Whitmire. He told me to send you right up soon's you arrived."

Jenkins led the way down the dark, wide hallway to an ornate bannistered staircase ascending to a second floor landing. He rapped sharply on the door and a deep-throated voice responded: "Who is it?"

"Mr. Shayne, sir," Jenkins said, and pushed open the door.

The room was lined with books and old hunting prints and some well-worn, comfortable looking leather furniture. At one end was a roll-top desk, at which sat Buford Whitmire. He turned around in the swivel desk chair and smiled at Shayne, then stood and shook the detective's hand as Jenkins departed, shutting the door behind him.

Whitmire indicated a chair beside the desk, and Shayne sat down, studying the secretary as he settled himself. Buford Whitmire was handsome and of aristocratic features, with a mane of white hair and bright, sparkling blue eyes. He was wearing casual sports clothes better than most men wear expensive suits, Shayne reflected, and his liking for the secretary was reaffirmed—and his respect for the man's unimpeachable honesty and integrity.

"You brought the report?" Whitmire asked. "I'm anxious to see it."

Shayne nodded and removed a manila envelope from inside his jacket. Whitmire took out the typewritten report and studied it for several minutes. Then he sighed and leaned back, rubbing his eyes wearily.

"It's all there, isn't it?" he said. "All the proof needed to expose that damned assistant of mine."

Whitmire hit his fist on the desk. "I only wish to God you'd been able to find out who was in this scheme with Dunkirk."

"As I told you on the phone yesterday morning, Mr. Secretary, in another couple of weeks I might have dug out the other or others. But if you're serious about getting Otis Dunkirk now, we may never be able to find out; they'll head for the woodwork like vermin."

"I know, I know, and I'm sorry about it, but it can't be helped. This matter of Dunkirk's grafting has come to a head."

"You shouldn't have taken the chance of calling me," Shayne said grimly. "I can't be sure that your phones haven't been bugged."

"I telephoned you from home, just to be on the safe side, and only after the electronics man you recommended checked out everything."

"Good. Now, as I understand the little you told me yesterday, your assistant has moved up the big opening for the Americus Irrigation project. Instead of the bids being opened three weeks from Monday, they're to be opened this coming Monday, at eight in the morning. Why did Dunkirk do that, without your knowledge?"

The secretary leaned forward intently, frowning, his elbows on the desk. "I didn't have time yesterday to go into the details, other than to impress you on the importance of having that report now. As you know, I hired you privately because while I might have had my suspicions, I couldn't move without definite proof, proof not only of his duplicities but of the innocence of the state government and my office."

"I understand, but what has that got to do with—"

"I believe that my assistant is aware of the investigation, Shayne. I feel it in the air, if you must know, sense it with the same instincts that Dunkirk must sense his being hunted. I don't feel he's on to how completely he's been uncovered.

"But this moving of the bid opening makes me think that he wants to make one final coup before the lid is blown off. I bet he figures that three days from now, on Monday morning, he'll open the bids, award the project to the construction company you verified is paying him ten thousand dollars to win that bid, and then he'll abscond with the money. With *all* the money he's made selling out his state."

A strange glow of anger and indignation flickered in the secretary's eyes, and his face was set in stern, forced lines.

"Mr. Shayne, the Americus Project is the largest single appropriation in Florida's con-

struction history, and it's my personal project as well, one I've fought to have legislated for years. I believe in the land and people the irrigation will help, and I'll be damned if I'm going to let that criminal, or anybody else besides Dunkirk, ruin it."

"And on Monday morning?"

"I am going to go to that bid opening with him, and if that construction company wins, I'm going to throw it out. It, Dunkirk, and all the rest we've got evidence on." He sighed and leaned back, adding bitterly, "It's a sad business."

Shayne nodded in agreement. "Is Dunkirk here now?"

Whitmire said, "Downstairs in the parlor with my other guests. This is an annual get-together for me, and up till now, Otis was my friend as well as assistant. There wasn't any way of backing out of my invitation without spilling the whole thing. I. . . think under the circumstances that it's best you were here for the weekend anyway. Having gone so far, no telling what he might do if he once realises he's cornered."

"Has he given you any indication that he's aware we're onto him?"

"No." The secretary turned his chair and stared morosely out the window. The mid-afternoon was grey and heavy, like the darkening of dusk, and the rain was nearly horizontal now, crashing against the glass with ever increasing strength.

"With this hurricane, I could have called the whole thing off, though," Whitmire said. "I should have—but I didn't know it would be this bad."

"None of us did," Shayne replied. "Clarissa veered from her course too quickly yesterday. I tried to call you back, but you'd already left."

"It's going to be a long weekend, I'm afraid." Buford Whitmire rose ponderously. "I believe it's time we made our appearance downstairs, don't you?"

Shayne stood up. He tugged his left ear lobe. "Who else is here besides Dunkirk? You mentioned others."

"My ex-wife for one." Whitmire chuckled as he saw the startled expression on the redhead's face. "Stella and I are the best of friends, Mr. Shayne. Have been since we mutually agreed that our interests and feelings weren't compatible any longer.

"She's remarried, and her husband, Dr. Giles Kinsley, is also along. A fine man. I think you'll like him. Then there's my daughter, Ginny, and her current boyfriend, Walter Denton. And Claire Madison, my fiancee. If it wasn't for this horrid matter with Dunkirk, I'd be walking on a cloud, I don't mind saying. Claire is a lovely and talented

woman, and I hope to marry her very shortly."

"My congratulations," Shayne said as they walked down the stairs. "Does she know the true reason I'm here?"

"I haven't told her or anybody else. You're an old political booster from Key West that I haven't seen in years."

"We'll keep it that way." Mike Shayne was relieved that discretion had been kept right up to the last minute.

They entered the parlor, a high-ceilinged room with heavy, ponderous furnishings. There were four people grouped around the Inglenook fireplace, all of them standing and being warmed by the large, crackling blaze which was minimizing the moaning and howling of the hurricane outside. The secretary began the introductions with his fiancee, an attractive woman in her early thirties. She had long blonde hair and the green eyes of a cat, and her voice as she greeted Mike Shayne was soft and rich, containing just a hint of a Georgia or Carolinas accent.

Always an admirer of female charm, Shayne smiled lop-sidedly as he noted her sleek beauty and caught the jasmine scent of her perfume. He thought of her as being both sensual and poised, an uncommon combination in a woman.

"Mr. Shayne," Claire Madison

said. "So good of you to come in this weather. I've heard so much about you."

"Oh?"

"You certainly helped Buford in his early career, from all he tells me. I can't help but say that it is a pleasure to meet someone who had belief and faith in him for so long." She glanced fondly at the secretary. "I'm only sorry that I didn't have the same chance."

Whitmire, reddening slightly, moved on to his daughter. Ginny was raven-haired, her smile crisp, and her dark eyes level. She was a professional sculpturess in Tampa, having a small studio there and, as she said with a wry grin, "Even a smaller clientele."

"Glad you could make it," Doctor Kingsley said in a deep yet surprisingly gentle voice. He

was a tall, florid, broad-shouldered man in his late forties, sporting a thick grey moustache. His grip was firm and hearty. "Though there's not much chance for the hunting Buford promised, is there, not with the storm outside. Do you play poker?"

"I've been known to sit in on a hand or two," the detective responded. "How about a game after dinner?"

"Exactly what I was leading up to," the doctor said.

"And this is my assistant," Whitmire said, turning to the last of the four. "Mike, meet Otis Dunkirk."

This was the first time that Shayne had actually met the corrupt assistant. He was a dour-faced individual, wearing a hearing aid, and who looked a little like an undertaker.

"How do you do?" Dunkirk said as they clasped hands, his voice without any inflection.

Shayne saw a veiled wariness in the man's eyes; did Dunkirk know who Shayne was, or that his graft had been discovered? The redhead made a mental note to watch the assistant closely for the slightest signs of trouble.

The young, intense-looking man beside the boar's head trophy was Walter Denton. He had a shock of sand-colored hair over his forehead, and wore a plaid hunting shirt with a note pad and several pens visible in its breast pocket.

Whitmire said: "Mike, this is Walter, my daughter's friend."

"Lover, Mr. Whitmire," Denton corrected. "I'm your daughter's lover. We live together."

The tension between the two was evident, their animosity thinly held in check. The secretary pursed his lips.

"He's a writer, Mike," Whitmire said.

Mike Shayne turned to the woman sitting in the large, wing-back chair. Giles Kingsley crossed to her and placed a protective hand around her shoulder.

"This is my wife," the doctor said. "Stella, Mike Shayne."

"Pleased to meet you," Stella Kingsley said in a tone as stiff as her hand.

She was a handsome woman, firm and well-curved in black jodhpurs and a white blouse. Her short brown hair was carefully bobbed, shining reflectively in the firelight. She sat ram-rod straight, looking ahead as her husband stood above her, not quite meeting Shayne's eyes with hers. There was a glazed, distant appearance to her eyes, but Shayne thought that might be a trick of the firelight as well.

Jenkins came through the swinging door from the kitchen and announced that cocktails would be served presently, and

then Ginny Whitmire sat down beside the fire, letting her boyfriend wander over to study the rifles in a large display case on the other side of the room.

Claire Madison crossed to the secretary, and the Miami-based detective and Otis Dunkirk were left before the fireplace, both men staring into the flames as outside, Hurricane Clarissa assaulted the house, causing it to shudder and groan.

Dunkirk said at length, "What is it you do, Mr. Shayne? Your name is familiar to me, but I can't quite place it."

"A number of things," Shayne replied vaguely, letting a crooked grin flash across his craggy features. "Investments and speculations."

The assistant turned his lined face so that the ear with the hearing aid was favored. "Key West is where you're from, isn't that so?"

"That's right." Shayne felt his muscles tense, and forced his answer to be light. "Key West. For years."

"Hmm." Dunkirk frowned, putting his fingers to his forehead in thought. "I swear I've heard your name. . ." He stopped, looked up at the rangy detective and snapped his fingers. "Of course! Mike Shayne!"

Moving quickly, he started away from the fireplace. Shayne was about to go after him, realising that the assistant had recognized him, but then Dunkirk halted, stopping in midstride as if a giant hand had suddenly gripped him. He stood motionless for only a second or so, Shayne pausing, caught offguard.

And then the corrupt assistant screamed.

It was without warning—a loud, agonized, horror-filled scream—and Dunkirk flung both hands to his head. He swayed, clutching his hair with clawed fingers, and then toppled forward onto the rug.

Hurricane Clarissa battered savagely with a different kind of screaming; different, but none the less frightening.

II

OTIS DUNKIRK'S scream tapered off into a strangled choke as he sprawled on the floor, the sound of it blending with the howling of the wind like some hellish dirge.

Doctor Kingsley was beside the stricken man almost as quickly as Mike Shayne. He turned him over, grasped a wrist to test for a pulse beat. Moments later, he straightened up, his face a grim mask.

"My God!" Whitmire said. His face was ashen. "What—what happened to him?"

"I can't be sure. Brain

embolism, perhaps. A blod clot or a coronary. It has all the earmarks of something like that."

Stella Kingsley had not moved from where she sat, though she had pressed herself further back in the chair. She held tightly onto the chair arms.

Whitmire's daughter, Ginny, had her back to Dunkirk now, after one brief shocked view of him, Jenkins stood motionless, still holding the tray, his seamed old face grim.

Shayne turned his attention back to the dead assistant. Doctor Kingsley had gotten to his feet and was pulling an old quilted afghan off the sofa back. He used it to cover Dunkirk's body. He looked at Whitmire then.

"We can't leave him here in the parlor, Buford."

"Yes, you're right," Whitmire agreed.

"The pantry?" Jenkins suggested. "There's a table in there."

"All right."

The old caretaker, Shayne, and Kingsley carried the inert form between them, out through the kitchen to the dim, bitingly cold pantry. They placed Dunkirk on a long wooden table, the afghan shrouding him.

The hurricane shrieked through the warped wooden walls, wind scurrying around their feet from small chinks in the boarding. The single bulb dangling from the long cord in the middle of the pantry swung and flickered, its vague yellow glow moving in an arc, constantly shifting shadows.

The three men stepped back into the kitchen, and Jenkins closed the door. Shayne said, "We'll have to notify the police in Greenville. They'll come out with an ambulance and take care of Dunkirk. I'll make the call if you'll show me the phone, Jenkins."

"There isn't any phone," the old caretaker said. "Secretary Whitmire likes his privacy out here."

"Then somebody will have to drive in to Greenville."

"It had best be you, Jenkins," the doctor said. "You know these roads better than the rest of us."

The caretaker obviously didn't relish the idea of braving the hurricane, but he didn't argue. He nodded tightly and left the kitchen to put on his rain gear.

As Shayne and Doctor Kinsley followed him, the detective did some heavy thinking. He had a natural aversion to coincidence, an occupational distrust of pat answers and obvious situations. It seemed to him too convenient that the man he was supposed to protect his client from, the man he had uncovered as a thief,

should suddenly die of natural causes. It wasn't totally unlikely that it had happened just that way, but nevertheless Shayne was bothered.

He was just as bothered by the alternatives. If a natural disorder hadn't killed Otis Dunkirk, what had? What—and who? And why?

Shayne and Kingsley stepped into the parlor again, and the redhead took a quick inventory of its occupants. He said to Whitmire, "Where's your daughter, Mr. Secretary? And Walter Denton?"

"Why, I don't know."

"Ginny wasn't feeling well," Claire Madison said. "She asked me if she could go upstairs. I believe the Denton boy followed." She smiled faintly.

"Giles," Stella Kingsley said, "will you put some more wood on the fire? Please? I'm freezing."

Shayne noted that her eyes were still peculiarly filmed, and her mouth hung slack, causing her words to slur slightly.

On the roof, shingles loosened by the wind suddenly cracked sharply. Stella cried out and pressed the back of her hand to her mouth like a child in a dark room. Her husband went to her immediately.

"Now, now," he soothed. "It's just the storm."

"Otis. . .Otis looked so much

older," she murmured. "So much older and greyer. And he's dead. . .dead. . ." Her voice rose.

"Stop it, Stella," Kingsley snapped. "Get a hold on yourself. You're only making matters worse."

The older woman nodded and then seemed to withdraw into her shell again.

Claire, Whitmire, Kingsley and Stella, stood or sat in obvious discomfort then, lost in their own private worlds.

Time passed inexplicably—and then Jenkins staggered in from the kitchen on his spindly bow-legs, soaked to the skin in spite of his rain slicker and hat. He stood just inside the door, gasping for breath.

"The bridge," he managed finally. "The bridge has been washed out. We're trapped here."

The old caretaker's pro-

nouncement was followed by a long moment of shocked silence. Then Stella Kingsley released a low, muffled cry and buried her face in her hands. She began to rock to and fro, whimpering. Again, her husband went to comfort her.

Shayne stared at the drenched form of Jenkins.

"There's no way at all that we can get out of this place?"

"Not until that hurricane moves on or dies out," the old man answered. "We can't ford the lake stream until she's calm, and we can't go across the lake, either."

Shayne cursed mentally. This made things worse, much worse. Without the Law, and with a hurricane raging outside, the edgy if not already panicked occupants were trapped here in the lodge with a dead man and maybe, just maybe, a murderer.

"What are we going to do?" Stella cried behind her hands. "I'm afraid, Giles, I don't want to stay here! Oh God—"

Doctor Kingsley glanced grimly at the others in the room, and then helped his wife to her feet.

"Come on, dear," he consoled her, "I'll take you upstairs and you can lie down."

Jenkins, his leathery features set tautly, turned back into the kitchen, stripping off his sodden garments. Claire Madison, who had been standing next to her fiancé, hugging herself as with a chill, followed after him.

"I'll make him some coffee," she said, "and the rest of us some, too. We could all use it, I think."

Whitmire, his aristocratic features haggard, said to Shayne, "This is a damned nasty business, Dunkirk dying the way he did. It's a little too coincidental if you ask me."

"My feelings exactly," Shayne told him.

"But if it *wasn't* death from natural causes, then—" Whitmire stopped, grimacing at the word which was obviously in his mind.

"Then it was *murder*, Mr. Secretary," Shayne said. "And someone in this lodge is a premeditated killer."

Whitmire's face was ashen. "But they're all my friends, my family." He shuddered. "What reason could any of them have had for killing Dunkirk, or even for wanting him dead?"

"Suppose one of them had an old grudge against Dunkirk, something you wouldn't necessarily be aware of."

"That's possible, but not likely."

"All right, then," Shayne said, "suppose one of them was involved with Dunkirk on this Americus Project bribery? From the information I was able to uncover, we know Dunkirk wasn't alone in the deal. Maybe

his accomplice is as closely connected with you as he was, somehow found out that you were on to Dunkirk, and decided to get rid of him before he could spill the accomplice's name. Whoever it was has hidden his connection well, and may figured Dunkirk was the only link and had to be gotten rid of."

"I can't believe that," Whitmire said, but his words lacked conviction. "We may still be wrong about Dunkirk's death, and—" Suddenly, the secretary's lips clamped shut and a hot, hard light came into his eyes. He snapped, "Walter Denton!"

"What?" Shayne said.

"I haven't been thinking very clearly these past few minutes," Whitmire said darkly. "There's one person in this lodge right now who might very well have been connected with Otis Dunkirk and his crooked dealings. Damn, I should have mentioned this earlier!"

"Mentioned what?"

"Walter Denton is the nephew of Harlow Sternwheeler."

The redhead scowled. "The owner of Trans-Florida Construction?"

"That's right," Whitmire said. "The company that was paying Dunkirk the kickbacks on the Americus Project. I've known Sternwheeler for years, been to a party or two at his home in Tallahassee. That's how Ginny met Denton in the first place."

Shayne considered. "Tell me a little about Denton."

The secretary's mouth twisted. "I don't like him, obviously. He's a weak-kneed, no-talented sponger who fancies himself an Artist with a Capital A. He'd deluded my daughter into believing in him, even when his family threw him out because his high-minded temperament kept him from accepting a position in the construction company."

"Then he doesn't have any money?"

"Hell, no! He lives off what Ginny makes as a sculptress." A stricken look came over Whitmire's face. "My God, I just remembered! He's upstairs with Ginny, right now! If he's involved in this, if he's a murderer—" Whitmire turned abruptly, running into the hallway.

Shayne caught up with him at the staircase. "Take it easy, Mr. Secretary," he cautioned, putting a firm hand on the politician's arm. "There's nothing to be gained in bursting in and shouting accusations, when we haven't any proof. We'd be smarter to try to draw him out with some careful questioning."

Whitmire took a deep breath. "Yes, I suppose you're right. If he hasn't harmed Ginny before now, he likely won't at this moment."

The two men proceeded upstairs and along the hallway to the room the secretary designated as his daughter's. Shayne knocked loudly, but there was no answer; he reached out and tried the knob, and the door opened under his hand. The room was empty.

"They're not here," Whitmire said. His voice had risen.

"Maybe they're in Denton's room," the rangy detective suggested. "Which one would that be?"

Whitmire took him along the hall to another closed door, and Shayne rapped on the panel. Again, there was no answer.

Sweat had broken out on the secretary's forehead, and there was growing fright in his eyes. "Damn it, where could they be? We didn't see them downstairs."

"They may have come down earlier, while we were waiting for Jenkins," Shayne said. "Come on. We'll ask the others if they've seen Denton and your daughter."

They went to the Kingsley's room, and a knock summoned the doctor. He looked harried and worried, and he kept glancing over his shoulder at the inert form of his wife on the bed, a cold compress over her forehead.

He told Shayne that he hadn't seen either Walter Denton or Ginny Whitmire.

The secretary and Shayne hurried downstairs, found Claire Madison in the parlor.

"Where did you go?" she asked. "I came in with the coffee, and there was no one here."

"Upstairs to talk to Ginny," Whitmire told her. "But she's gone. There's no sign of either her or Denton."

"Gone?" Claire said. "But where could they have gone to?"

Shayne asked, "You haven't seen either of them?"

"Not since Ginny went up to lie down."

The swing doors from the kitchen opened and Jenkins came in.

Shayne said, "Jenkins, have you seen Ginny or Walter Denton?"

The old caretaker frowned. "Matter of fact, I did, just after I came back with the news about the bridge. They were out in back, in the rear hallway. They asked if I'd gotten through and I told him no and about the bridge."

"Did you see where they went after you talked to them?"

"No, I didn't."

Whitmire tugged at Shayne's arm. "You don't suppose they went out in this godawful hurricane, do you?"

Shayne shook his head. "Let's have a look in the rear of the lodge."

Whitmire nodded, and he and

Shayne hurried out into the kitchen, past the pantry entrance, and through into the rear hallway. Just as they did so, the rear door came crashing suddenly inward, partially from the thrust of the man who stood on the short porch outside and partially from the tremendous force of the gale winds and slashing rain. The man was Walter Denton, and his eyes were wild, his face a ghostly white beneath his dripping slicker's hood.

He saw Shayne and Whitmire and wiped wetness from his face, his throat working spasmodically. Then he managed, "It's it's Ginny! She's been hurt!"

A look of insensible rage contorted the secretary's features. He jumped forward, grabbing Denton by the throat. "You damned maniac! If you've harmed Ginny, I'll kill you! I'll—"

Shayne caught Whitmire's arm. Denton slumped against the door, gasping.

"What happened to Ginny?" Shayne demanded of Denton. "Where is she?"

"In the boathouse. She fell and hit her head."

Shayne grasped Denton's arm and propelled him through the door, into the howling gale outside. Whitmire rushed after them as they ran down off the porch, through the sloshing mud of the yard beyond.

The icy slapping fingers of the wind and rain tore at Shayne's thin suitcoat, numbing and drenching his unprotected body before they had gone twenty yards.

The three men ran along a narrow, muddied path toward the storm-tossed waters of the lake, and toward the darkly shadowed outline of a rectangular structure at its edge. As they neared the boathouse, Shayne could see the long finger of a pier extending out into the turbulent water, inundated by the rolling waves.

Denton staggered in the mud, almost fell, and Shayne steadied him with the iron grip on his sleeve. The redhead wiped the freezing rainwater from his eyes, blinking into the wind-whipped darkness ahead. Then, finally, they reached the rear of the boathouse and cut around to the far side, where a door was set into the structure. It was shut, rattling loudly in the savage gusts of wind.

Shayne jerked it open, shoved Denton ahead of him inside. He and Whitmire pushed in after the younger man, and the detective saw that the interior was small and narrow, bisected into two halves by a long section of churning water. A tarpaulin-covered cruiser bounced and crashed against the rubber tires which lined the vertical walls of

the canal on both sides as protection against just such a buffeting.

Ginny Whitmire lay a few feet away on the near half.

Her father gave a low moan and pushed roughly past Shayne and Denton, running along the wood flooring to her. He knelt down, lifted her head gingerly.

Then he lowered his own head, listened at her chest for a moment.

"She's alive," he said over his shoulder. "Thank God!"

"All right, Denton," Shayne demanded harshly, "what happened here?"

"She—she was trying to get the tarp off the cruiser. One of the swells coming in through the gate up front lifted the boat and knocked her down. She hit her head on one of those crates."

"You bastard!" Whitmire whispered fervently.

"What were you doing out here?" Shayne asked Denton.

"We wanted to get away from here and we thought we could take the boat across the lake to do it. Ginny—Ginny said she could handle it, even in the hurricane."

"It's a lucky thing you didn't try it," Shayne said grimly. "You'd have gone down out there inside of five minutes."

Whitmire was lifting his daughter into his arms. "I'm going to take her back to the house and have Giles look at her. She might have a concussion." His voice was fearful.

Shayne nodded. "You go with him, Denton," he said. "And you'd better be there when I return."

"What are you going to do, Shayne?" Whitmire asked.

"Have a look around here," the redhead answered.

When they had gone, and Shayne was alone in the boathouse, the rangy detective made a quick survey of the interior. He found nothing. Then he carefully knelt by the rolling, jouncing boat and lifted the rear section of the tarp.

Ten minutes later, he had the keys from the ignition in his pocket and the gas tank removed and hidden. He wasn't taking any chances of anyone else trying to get off this small island, whatever their reason.

Shayne left the boathouse and ran through the driving rain and the mournfully howling wind, thinking of nothing so much as a hot shower and the relative warmth of the lodge. He reached the rear porch, put one foot on the bottom step, and then stopped. Something—an inbred sixth sense—warned him of impending danger; the hairs on the back of his neck stood up as the storm raged around him.

Then his eyes lifted and he saw the dark, indistinct blur of

something hurtling down at him from above, something huge and heavy and deadly.

III

THE BIG DETECTIVE threw himself to one side and landed on his left shoulder, sliding in the rain and mud, rolling with the one prime intention of escaping the falling object. Scrag-brush scratched him, whipping like tenacious flagellents from the buffeting wind, and water soaked through him to his skin. The hurtling mass struck the spot where Shayne had been, exploding with a dull crunch, hurtling fragments all around, one shard striking his cheek and drawing blood in an ugly gash.

The hurricane howled at the redhead as he slowly staggered erect, the storm derisive at his narrow brush with death. He stopped to inspect what he had almost been hit by, and saw that it was the remains of a large, ceramic urn, the kind which had been popular in town-houses and estates a century ago.

It was also dry for the most part, and as he looked up to the broad ledge beneath the second floor window, Shayne concluded that the storm was not the culprit. The urn had not been left on the ledge or it would have been as wet as he, so it must have come from inside the house.

The other windows were devoid of urns or similar objects, and were shuttered tightly, while the window directly above had its screens unhooked, and they were banging wildly. And then the grey of the old glass window was darkened by the black silhouette of a person, though it was impossible to tell who. As the silhouette vanished, Shayne knew without doubt. Murder.

Somebody had tried to murder him. Somebody had been waiting up in that room and had thrown the urn down, and had it succeeded, it would have looked like an unfortunate but natural accident. Like Dunkirk's death, perhaps?

Shayne didn't know who, nor if Dunkirk was the first to be murdered, but he was angered and intent on delving to the bottom of the mystery. And the first thing he wanted to do was have a look at that room, in case the person had left behind a clue.

A low false balcony ran along

the side, becoming the ornate pediment over the back porch doorway, then the widow's walk along the front of the house. It had fancy gingerbread cornices, concealing the sloping Mansard roof above, and the trim had rotted away in portions, especially toward the back where the ground sloped upwards by a utility shed, and its supporting timbers looked frail and decayed.

Shayne decided to take the chance and climb up, rather than go back in the house the way his would-be killer would expect him to do. He ran to the back and jumped up, his hands curling around the gutter, and he could almost hear the locust pegs which held it together break under his weight. The wind fought him, making him use every muscle to keep his balance and not lose his precarious grip on the slick wood.

Shayne twisted and turned, the storm tossing him, but then he kicked out and upwards, catching the heel of one shoe on the ledge. Using it as a support, he hauled himself up until he was on the narrow balcony.

Then he made his way to the unshuttered window, avoiding the hinged shutters as they batted back and forth. He kept to one side, hunkering down to be as small a target as possible, and gripped the edge of the casement. It gave slightly, squeaking; he hit it with his palm, swinging it wide, and dove through into the room.

He hit the floor in a roll, coming up at once and moving aside warily, but the room was empty. He looked around as his vision adjusted to the gloom, and saw that at one time this had been a bedroom. Now, however, the original furnishings were covered with sheets, and more furniture had been added in a hap-hazard fashion, along with trunks and portions of undiscernable objects that the many owners of the house had discarded. Cobwebs and dust filmed everything, the only part that looked disturbed being a path through the dust from the hall door to the window and back again, and where Shayne had landed and rolled.

Mike Shayne turned and latched the window, stopping any more rain from splattering inside, and went to the door. The long hall was lost in shadows; his attacker was gone.

Shayne quietly walked down the hall to his room, stopping before each door and pressing his ear to the cold wood, hoping to detect something which might help. But he reached his own quarters without hearing another soul, not even as he paused at the top of the stairs and listened for sounds from below. Only the

storm made mournful noises as it gusted down the hall.

Once inside his room, he stripped off his muddy and soaked clothing and towled himself dry, then dressed in clean pants and shirt. He crossed to the large, gilt-framed mirror on the wall over his dresser, examining the cut the pottery shard had made, and it was then that he heard the faint sounds of voices coming through the wall from the next room. He opened his closet beside the dresser and hunched beside the thin panel separating the two rooms, listening.

". . .tell you, you must!" It was obviously the voice of Dr. Kingsley, his tone distraught and his normal calmness broken.

"Sorry, sir," came the reply. Shayne recognized it as the terse gruffness of Jenkins. "I won't. I've been out once tonight, and that's enough. I won't because I can't do what you want. The lake is whipped up worse than I can remember. Believe me; I saw what it was like out there, with nothing left of the bridge but a few supports. We'd never have a chance. We'd capsize before we'd gone ten feet and be sucked under in two minutes flat."

"But I've got to get my wife ashore! She won't last, not with everything that's gone on here, not with the storm and Dunkirk's death!"

"She's a mighty upset woman, all right, but there's nothing I can do. Now, when she was married to Mr. Whitmire, why he—"

"To hell with Buford! Stella's on the verge of a collapse! I'm trying to save her from a mental breakdown, one which may take her years to recover from, and I swear that if she doesn't get away from this lodge, with all its memories and this storm, she'll go over the edge. And no telling what she might do then!

"I should have never allowed her to come here," the doctor moaned. "She insisted, and none of us knew that the hurricane would come in this direction. . ." His final words were cut off as if he had covered his face with his hands.

"Listen, doctor, I know how you feel. But there isn't any way of crossing the lake." Jenkins coughed hollowly, evidently embarrassed. "We're marooned, but as soon as the water calms, then we'll take the boat. Now, we better go downstairs."

"Yes, Stella will be needing me," Kingsley said in a dejected voice. "I'll just have to keep her calm somehow."

There was the sound of footsteps, the closing of a door, and then Shayne moved from his cramped position. Grim-faced and determined, the large redhead walked to his suitcase

and took out his shoulder holster and gun, stripped off his coat to put on the harness, then rebuttoned the coat and walked out of his room. He started his way downstairs, down to the parlor, knowing what he had to do next and not liking it at all.

IV

THE ATMOSPHERE in the parlor was one of tenseness and fear. Mike Shayne sensed it immediately as he entered, his alert gaze sweeping the room and its occupants. He saw that Ginny Whitmire was conscious and sitting in the chair nearest the fireplace, wrapped in heavy blankets; a professional bandage had been applied over the cut on her forehead. She seemed sullen, her eyes cast downward.

Walter Denton, also swaddled in a blanket, sat across from her, staring into the fire. Claire Madison was on the sofa, a cup of coffee balanced in her lap. At the other end of the sofa sat Stella Kingsley, who appeared somewhat calmer now, if still frightened and white-faced. Beside her, grim-jawed, stood Doctor Giles Kingsley, watching her covertly.

Buford Whitmire, wearing dry clothes now, came forward from his position beside his daughter and caught the redhead's arm. "Where have you been, Shayne? You've been gone a long while."

"Almost getting myself killed," the detective answered curtly, and moved further into the room, facing the assemblage. "There's something a couple of you already know, and that the rest of you might as well know," he announced. "I'm not merely an old friend of Secretary Whitmire; I'm a private detective hired by him to investigate a confirmed conspiracy headed by Otis Dunkirk on the Americus Project.

"Someone in this house just tried to kill me outside, by pushing an urn down on me. It was no accident, and that means that whoever made the attempt knows who I am and why I'm here. And since Dunkirk is dead, apparently by natural causes, I can't see any reason for keeping my identity a secret any longer."

The others in the room were staring open-mouthed at Shayne. The redhead studied their faces, but he saw nothing in any of them to indicate gult or panic. His assailant, whoever it was, possessed an icy inner calm, and that made him all the more deadly.

Kingsley said, "I don't understand this, Shayne. Why would anyone in this house want you dead, if Dunkirk was the man you were investigating?"

"Dunkirk wasn't alone in his illegal dealings," Shayne told

him. "He had at least one accomplice, maybe more."

"And you think that accomplice tried to kill you because he was afraid you'd uncover him as you'd uncovered Dunkirk?"

"That's right. And maybe for other reasons, too."

"You said that Otis is dead, apparently of natural causes," Claire Madison put in. "What did you mean, Mr. Shayne?"

"His death is too convenient to be automatically taken as natural," Shayne said. "Especially in light of the try on my life."

Whitmire said, glaring, "If you want my opinion, Shayne, Dunkirk's partner and the one who tried to kill you is this poor excuse for a man right here, Walter Denton!"

"That's a lie!" Denton shouted.

"You were gone to the bathroom down the hall for ten minutes, supposedly drying off," Whitmire accused. "You could have gone up the back stairs and pushed that urn."

"Walter had nothing to do with any of this, with Mr. Dunkirk or with trying to kill Mr. Shayne!" Ginny interjected angrily.

"All right, calm down, all of you," Shayne snapped. He turned to look at Denton, and at Ginny. "Suppose one of you tell me the reason you wanted to pull a foolish stunt like trying to take that cruiser across the lake in the middle of a hurricane?"

Denton and the girl exchanged glances, but neither replied. "Come on," Shayne prodded, "let's have it."

Ginny moistened her lips. Then, in a halting voice, she said, "Maybe we'd better tell him, Walter."

Denton turned away, as if she had betrayed him. "I suppose so," he muttered. "What's the use now?"

"Well?" Shayne asked.

"Walter knew about his uncle Harlow paying off Mr. Dunkirk on the Americus Project," Ginny explained in a low voice. "He overheard them talking together one afternoon this past week at his uncle's home in Tallahassee. Dunkirk was telling Mr. Sternwheeler that he feared Father knew about their dealings and was having him investigated, and he wanted Mr. Sternwheeler to give him money."

"And?"

"That's all I could hear," Denton said, looking at Shayne again. "Except that Dunkirk threatened that he would name everyone who was in the conspiracy with him, including my uncle, if he was taken into custody. He wanted my uncle to give him enough money to get away to South America."

"Did Dunkirk mention the name of an accomplice?"

"Not that I heard."

"Did your uncle agree to give him the money?"

"I don't know."

"Probably not, or Dunkirk wouldn't have come up here this weekend," Shayne said. "Sternwheeler must have refused Dunkirk, pending the outcome of the Americus Project bids. That would explain why Dunkirk changed the dates on the bidding."

"All right, but I still don't see what any of this has to do with the two of you planning to take the cruiser across the lake," Whitmire said to his daughter.

"Don't you, Father?" the girl asked him. "When Mr. Dunkirk died so unexpectedly, Walter thought right away that he might have been murdered, in spite of Dr. Kingsley's diagnosis. And he was afraid that he might be next, that the murderer knew Walter had been listening in on the conversation between Dunkirk and his uncle and wanted to get rid of him on the chance that he'd overheard the partner's name."

"That's right," Denton agreed. "I think Dunkirk may have seen me in the vicinity of the room where they were talking. He could have mentioned me to his partner, whoever it is."

"If that's the case," Shayne said, "why didn't you come to Mr. Whitmire instead of trying to run? For that matter, why didn't you go to the secretary as soon as you overheard Dunkirk and your uncle discussing graft dealings?"

Denton laughed humorlessly. "I didn't go to the secretary in the first place because my Uncle Harlow is the only member of my family who has ever treated me decently. I couldn't just expose him as a crook. And I didn't go to Whitmire tonight because I couldn't see where it would do me any good. I had no proof of what I suspected."

"That still doesn't give you much of a reason for trying to run away, an uncorroborated fear," Whitmire said gruffly.

"It wasn't his only reason, Father," Ginny said coldly. "Walter knew you'd remember Harlow Sternwheeler was his uncle and that sooner or later you'd try to connect him somehow with Mr. Dunkirk's death and with the Americus Project conspiracy—just as you did do. He was afraid that if one side didn't trap him, another one would. He was afraid and he wanted to get away somewhere until this whole business was cleared up. I didn't blame him then and don't blame him now. That's why I offered to take him across the lake in the cruiser."

"Running away never solved anything," Shayne told her. "It's

a lucky thing for both of you, in more ways than one, that you didn't get away in that boat."

Suddenly, from outside, there came a thunderous crash that seemed to shake the old house to its very foundations.

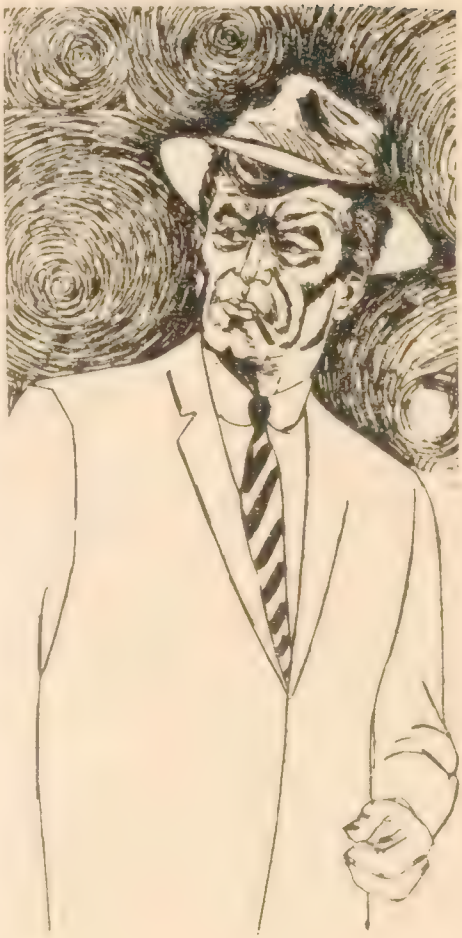
Stella Kingsley, who had sat staring as if hypnotized during the past few minutes, screamed piercingly and then began crying in hysterical sobs. Everyone else was on his feet, faces blanched.

Shayne turned and ran toward the kitchen. The sound had come from out to the rear of the house. Just before he reached the swing doors, they burst wide and Jenkins rushed into the room, almost colliding with the red-haired detective.

"It's all right, nothing to worry about," he announced loudly. "One of the big pines beyond the porch just uprooted and hit the ground near the house, that's all. No damage."

There were some relieved murmurs behind Shayne, and Ginny Whitmire and Walter Denton and Claire Madison sank into their seats once more. Dr. Kingsley was embracing his sobbing wife now, patting her hair awkwardly. Shayne returned to his former position by the fireplace.

"There are a couple of other things I'd like to know," he said. "Such as your whereabouts, all of you, when that urn was



pushed down at me a few minutes ago. Let's start with you, Mr. Secretary."

"Upstairs changing my clothes," Whitmire answered coldly. "I went directly to my room as soon as I was certain Ginny was all right. But if you suspect me—"

Shayne ignored that. "Doctor Kingsley?"

"After I treated Ginny, I went

right upstairs to see how Stella was. She was still lying down, asleep. Soundly asleep."

"Miss Madison?"

"I was in the kitchen, making more coffee and cleaning up," she replied.

"Denton, you were in the downstairs bathroom, drying off. Is that right?"

"That's right," he said firmly.

"And Ginny, you were here in the parlor?"

"Yes. After Doctor Kingsley revived me, and wrapped me in these blankets, I just sat here trying to get warm."

Shayne considered the information he had been given. Any one of them could have gone upstairs, or already been upstairs, to push that urn out the window; none had a definite alibi. Shayne looked at their pinched faces in the waning firelight. He glanced then at his watch, saw that it was almost eleven. There was no further purpose to be served in keeping everyone up now; he had all the answers he felt he would get tonight, at least by direct questioning.

"Why don't you all go up to your rooms and try to get some rest?" he told the assemblage. "It's late, and staying up won't help matters any."

"Fine suggestion, Shayne," Kingsley said sardonically, "now that you've succeeded in frightening hell out of everyone with your talk about conspiracy and murder." Scowling, he led his wife out of the parlor.

Moments later, Claire Madison, Denton, and Ginny Whitmire followed them, leaving only Shayne and Jenkins and the secretary. The old caretaker said, "I'll go around and check the doors and windows to make sure they're secure before I turn in." He left the room quickly on his bandy legs.

Whitmire said, "I'm not so sure that was the wisest course, Shayne, revealing yourself the way you did."

"It served its purpose. Now, whoever Dunkirk's accomplice is will have to tread carefully if he plans another attempt on my life, with the others in the house alerted to the possible danger."

"Maybe you're right," Whitmire admitted. "But my nerves won't stand much more of this tension. We'd better get to the bottom of this business, and damned soon, before we all become hysterical."

"Speaking of that," Shayne said, "I meant to ask you about your ex-wife."

"Stella? What about her?"

"She's on the verge of a complete mental breakdown," the redhead said slowly. "Would you know why?"

Whitmire averted his eyes, and a brief cut of pain flashed on his face. He didn't answer im-

mediately, as if considering the advisability of confiding in the detective. Then he sighed resignedly and faced Shayne again.

"Stella is—or was—an alcoholic, Mr. Shayne. That's the real reason she and I were divorced six years ago. She was in an institution shortly after that, but when she came out she had the problem all over again. Then she met and married Giles Kingsley. He finally succeeded in getting her off the bottle, but at the expense of her nerves, I'm afraid."

"So that's why he's constantly watching over her."

"Yes. He's afraid, and with good cause, that all of this—the hurricane, Dunkirk's death, the mention of conspiracy and murder—might put her over the edge."

"I see," Shayne said reflectively. "All right, Mr. Secretary. We might as well turn in ourselves. There's nothing more we can do tonight."

Shayne went to his room along the silent hallway, took off his jacket but kept his gun harness on, and lay down on the bed after first locking his door.

He stared at the ceiling, physically tired but mentally alert, and listened to the drumming, screeching wind outside, the rattling of glass and shutters and loose boarding. The driven rain, like hail pellets against the window and outside wall, showed no sign of abating. If there were any sounds within the house itself, the hurricane effectively covered them.

The more Shayne thought of what had happened at the lodge tonight, the more firmly convinced he became that Otis Dunkirk's death had not been accidental. But if it had been murder, how had the killer accomplished the task? Poison was the most likely bet, but, as Dr. Kingsley had said downstairs, the symptoms hadn't reflected any familiar poison. Some other method, then? But what?

The detective didn't know, but he thought that, even though he wasn't a physician, there might be one way to find out. He had felt a vague restlessness, lying there, stemming from inactivity; but now he had some definite action to take, even if it proved abortive.

Shayne looked at his watch. It was after midnight now. Everyone would likely have had time to fall asleep, or at least be quietly in their beds—he hoped. He rolled off the bed and put his jacket on over his gun harness. Then he unlocked the door, as silently as possible, and peered out into the hallway. It was empty and dark.

He closed the door again and made his way to the staircase, descending the steps quietly. He

paused in the downstairs hall, listening, hearing only the screaming of the wind and rain without. It was dark in the house now, with only the glowing embers of the dying fire in the Inglenook Jenkins had turned out all the lights before retiring to his room on the opposite side of the hall.

Shayne moved along the hallway toward the kitchen and the pantry where the body of Otis Dunkirk had been taken. He wanted a look at the corpse, a close and undisturbed look, to possibly determine the cause of the death.

Once he learned that, he might have a clue as to who had killed Dunkirk—*if* Dunkirk had been killed.

Too many ifs, Shayne thought grimly, and he put the conjectures out of his mind. It was better to deal now only with facts, and in that way fit the pieces of the puzzle together in their proper order.

He continued along the hall to the kitchen, entered slowly, and then started across the shadowed, cold expanse toward the pantry door.

And then he stopped, listening, holding his breath.

He could hear noises, scuffling movements on the floor.

There was someone in the pantry besides the body of Otis Dunkirk.

V

MIKE SHAYNE drew his .38 and rushed through the swing-door leading into the pantry. The lone bulb was arcing erratically as it splashed its diffused light palely over the small, dusty room. Beneath it was the enshrouded body of Otis Dunkirk; the blanket carefully placed over the corpse was pulled back, disclosing the same hideous death-mask of pain which had been forever cast upon his ravaged features.

There was no one save Dunkirk in the pantry.

Shayne wiped his forehead, still positive he had heard somebody in the room. He peered into the recesses as they were lit dimly by the swinging lamp bulb, but only saw tins and boxes and other supplies.

Then, behind him, he heard more footsteps, retreating hollowly. He whirled around; no person could have gotten past him, back into the kitchen. . .

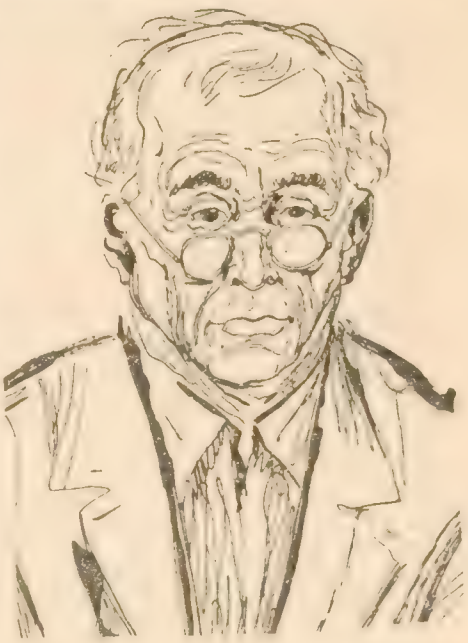
Beside the door, on its hinge side, was an alcove which by its position and Stygian darkness was lost from normal view. The light only invaded its blackness slightly, enough for Shayne to be able to make out the vague outline of another, smaller door at the back. The sounds were coming from beyond the doorway, past the slightly ajar door.

Recklessly, the redhead dashed for the second door, throwing it wide, just in time to hear the footfalls fade away.

The gloom was like a dense fog, allowing Shayne to see but the first few feet of a wood landing and the beginning of a flight of stairs; he decided that below was a cellar used for storage, with an outside entrance, perhaps. But whoever was down there would have to know the house exceedingly well to be able to find that other exit, for no flicker of light appeared in the total blindness.

Shayne was determined that this time his quarry would not escape, and since there wasn't time to get assistance, it was up to him to go down there and ferret out whoever it was that he'd heard. He groped along the wall for a light switch, knowing that there would have to be one. His hand brushed away dirt and broken plaster and cob-webs before he found the old-fashioned toggle switch. Holding his gun ready, he flicked on the lights.

A dull, ochre glow came from beneath, vaguely illuminating the cellar. A narrow slat staircase led steeply downward, close to a wall of crumbling mortar and rough-hewn stone, all dripping monotonously with the seepage of the hurricane's rain-water. Odd boxes and crates were piled



on top of one another, cutting off most of the view of the lower vault.

There was a pungent odor of decay and mustiness, of earth and dryrot—but no sign of the person who had descended. Shayne waited for a long moment, hoping to flush the intruder, force him to make a move so that he could get a bearing on his location.

Impatiently, he started down the squeaky steps, flattening himself in a crouch against the wet wall. He had reached the bottom and stepped on the ground, packed firm from years of usage and only slightly fluid from the storm, when the first

shot sounded. It was an echoing crack of a small gun.

Shayne ducked behind the crates to his left, and suddenly realized that the cellar was once more pitch dark. The bullet was not meant for him, but for the single light shining at the other end, and now the only light was coming from the indistinct haze of the pantry light above. Shayne ran a few feet to the protection of another stack of crates. From a deep corner, flame spouted, and two bullets slashed around him.

The light from the pantry, as bad as it was, was still enough to outline him when he moved, while he in turn had only the muzzle flashes to know generally where his attacker was in the utter darkness before him. The shots reverberated loudly, and Shayne wondered if two floors above they would even be noticed over the deafening pounding of the hurricane. He doubted it.

Shayne aimed carefully at the spot where he'd seen the gun flame and fired, spacing two answering slugs carefully, about two feet apart. There was a sudden crash and a scurrying. If he had hit the person, it hadn't been for good. Shayne raced down the narrow corridor of crates, trying to recall their position by memory, colliding with one in his haste which caused him to sprawl unceremoniously on the earth. The rank air split with another gunshot.

His fall saved his life. The carton above him splintered wood not a foot from his face and shuddered; the detective felt the concussion of air in his ears painfully and dropped still lower, feeling the wet, coarse earth against his fingers. He jerked around, rolling for the opposite side of the aisle, and saw the black shadow of a darting figure against the barely fainter shadows of the cellar.

Shayne, with his back against the light and his enemy obviously a good shot, aimed and pulled the trigger of his snub-nosed revolver hastily, knowing he wouldn't have a better chance before the killer was once more swallowed by the darkness. He fired twice, and then scrambled on his hands and knees on the spongy ground.

Silence fell, Shayne heard his own ragged breathing, but that was all. He listened intently, unable to tell if he had hit anything or not; the cannon-like blast of his own gun had hid the sound of a grunt or fall. Across the black space a person could be in the dirt, dead or badly wounded. Or not, ready instead to pump bullets into Shayne should he make the wrong move.

The detective waited some more; then, cautiously, he began

to pat the earth around him, hoping to find some heavy object. His fingers wrapped around a large tin can, full of something liquid, the droppage from an open carton already taken upstairs. He tossed it high toward the side of the cellar he'd seen the shadow scuttle. The tin hit and rattled. Another shot from the same vicinity shocked the stillness; the killer was very much alive and alert.

Shayne decided that the tide was beginning to turn in his favor. The enemy couldn't stay in the cellar much longer, not without running the ever-increasing risk of being cornered by the appearance of others, and his flight to avoid being seen in the pantry was becoming more of a trap with every passing minute. The rangy detective inched his way toward the cellar stairs, figuring the best plan for him would be to put his back against some crates and wait it out.

If his attacker tried for the stairs, he would have an excellent advantage to stop him, and if his attacker didn't try to escape, then morning would come and Shayne could deal with him with the help of the rest of the household. There was the chance that the killer would make his way out the exterior exit—if there was one and if it could be found in the dark. But even so, Shayne would hear the attempt that could fight that, as well.

There was the other satisfaction of knowing he wasn't a target this way, silhouetted against the pantry light. And neither could he be shot in the back. The Miami detective settled against the hard boards and the foul-smelling mud and waited.

Minutes passed. He heard stirrings and the quick steps like the passage of a rat in the walls, interspersed with long periods of absolute silence. Whoever was out there was advancing, little by little, cautiously, taking each section between covering cartons in short, quick runs. It was a giant, mortal game of blind man's bluff, with both players fighting for keeps with the same blindfolds in place.

Then there was an especially long time without a sound. He peered around, but saw nothing; he strained his ears for the slightest noise, but heard none. And then, suddenly, Shayne saw the heavy crates in front of him rock on their foundation, rock and then begin to topple over, straight at him. The killer was shoving the huge stack down upon him, and it was too late to scramble out of the way. . .

The wooden crates became an avalanche of sharp corners and weighted sides, accumulating momentum as they hurtled

downward. They engulfed Shayne like a mountain-slide, submerging him, crushing him, knocking the wind from his lungs. One large box hit the detective smartly on the shoulder, another on his back as he lurched over, covering his head with his hands.

Then one more hit him directly on the backs of his hands, and their pain was only momentary as a white flash erupted between his eyes, and he was sucked into oblivion in a vortex of greyness, like dirty water down a drain. . .

Shayne slowly fought his way back to the surface of consciousness. Every part of him ached, the pain ebbing and surging in waves of fire. The taste of blood was bitter in his mouth, and his thoughts were hazy and muddled. He tried to move, but couldn't.

Dizziness washed over him; he fought the tide of black nausea and lay still, listening to his heart beat and his head throb. At last he tried to move again, succeeded in shifting his position somewhat, feeling the terrible weight of the cartons on him. It was then that he fully remembered the events, the sound from the cellar, the fight, the collapse of the crates.

He was trapped, unable to free himself. He struggled, wondering periferally how long he had lain unconscious, how long he would continue to lie there.

He tried moving again as more strength returned. There was an ominous shifting, a protesting settling, and Shayne feared that he was making matters worse. But then he realized that he actually had more room to maneuver in, that other than one ankle pinned securely he was able to turn over and stretch out a bit. The crates had landed in such a fashion as to support one another.

He crawled sideways, turning in the darkness so that he could feel his leg. It wasn't broken, and then he hunched his shoulders against the imprisoning crate, straining in an awkward attempt to free himself. The box refused to budge; he heaved upwards again, and the box tilted slightly, just enough for him to be able to slide his ankle and shot out from under it. He let the box drop; again there was the grinding redistribution of balance.

The rangy detective tested for chinks and weak places in the pile which covered him. After careful study he found that by pushing the crate above to his left, he could perhaps get enough space to worm his way out. It took the moving of the left-hand crates stacked beside him so as to not allow the top one to fall, for the necessary room to be gained.

Panting, exhausted, his torn body hurt. But he was free, sprawled on the ground, his gun tightly in his grip. Knees weak, legs trembling, staggering in a weaving half crouch, he started for the stairs.

His would-be killer was long gone; that was for sure. The only reason Shayne could see why he was still alive was the fact that the crates had covered him too well for a *coup de grace* bullet. He smiled wryly at the thought that his assailant must have been wildly frustrated with the chance so perfect, yet impossible. He clutched the stairwell railing, the pantry light like a beacon leading him on.

He washed his face with cold water in the kitchen sink a seeming century later, then bloodied a dish towel as he wiped his face and scalp. Feeling slightly better, he returned to the pantry. He had started out wanting to see the corpse of Otis Dunkirk, and now more than ever he wished to inspect it. Whoever he had disturbed in the pantry had been there for the same reason, and that only increased Shayne's desire, even though he was concerned that he was now too late.

Dunkirk lay as before, his upper torso uncovered. Shayne checked his pockets after removing the blanket entirely, but discovered nothing out of the ordinary. He searched the body as best he could, even removing the shoes to see if there was anything stuffed in their toes. Nothing. He stepped back and looked at the dead man questioningly, and the unseeing eyes of Dunkirk looked back, the mouth open as if trying to say words which would now never be heard.

Heard. . . Shayne had been bothered from the minute he'd began his inspection, feeling there was something missing, something easily overlooked. He scratched his red hair and gently pulled his left ear-lobe.

Heard. . . Why did that keep coming back to him? Then he recalled the doctor's words: *He has all the ear-marks of. . .*

Of course! Shayne bent over Dunkirk, turning the body's head first one way and then the other, checking his ears.

But Dunkirk's small hearing aid was missing.

VI

MIKE SHAYNE scowled. Why had the killer taken such a seemingly unimportant object as a hearing aid—and apparently nothing else? He distinctly remembered seeing the small, flesh-colored instrument in Dunkirk's ear when he had helped deposit the body on the pantry table earlier in the evening. There

could be no mistake that it had been taken since that time, and almost certainly by the person who had very nearly succeeded in ending the redhead's career in the cold cellar below.

But *why?*

The rangy detective leaned closer to the corpse, examining the ear which had contained the hearing aid. In the pale light from the single pantry bulb, he could see a thick substance filling the inner ear. His scowl deepened, and he dug a book of matches from his jacket pocket and struck one, holding it close to the side of the dead man's head. The flickering light revealed the substance to be of a dark rust-color, dried to a flaking consistency.

Blood.

Shayne shook out the match and dropped it onto the floor. There was blood in Dunkirk's ear, blood which had been effectively concealed by the presence of the missing hearing aid when the man had died. *Blood and a hearing aid,* Shayne thought musingly. *What did it mean? Could the instrument have somehow been responsible for Dunkirk's death? He had thrown his hands up to his head and screamed horribly before toppling over. . .*

A glimmer of something he had once read or heard about touched Shayne's conscious memory, and then retreated again. He stood motionless, grasping at the nebulous thought and pulling it back into his awareness. Then he had it, and his craggy features tightened into grim lines. Yes. Yes, that was a possible answer, all right.

"Cold-blooded," he muttered softly. "What a cold-blooded merciless way to commit murder!"

But he couldn't be sure without a careful autopsy, which wouldn't soon be forthcoming, or without that missing hearing aid. Unless, if his assumption was right, he could locate a certain other device.

To cover all possibilities, no matter how remote, Shayne made a careful search of the pantry. He found nothing. Then he drew the blanket over Dunkirk's corpse again and left the pantry, walking quietly through the kitchen and into the parlor. He switched on the lights and went over to stand near the fireplace, in the spot where Dunkirk had stood just before he had died.

Shayne closed his eyes, mentally envisioning the location of the people in the room at the time. Stella Kingsley had been in one of the chairs by the Inglenook, her husband beside her; Ginny Whitmire in another chair, across from Stella; Walter Denton standing to one side,

beyond the Kingsleys, staring at the rifle case on the wall; Claire Madison standing near the Secretary, with Jenkins nearby; he himself a few paces behind Dunkirk, directly in front of the fireplace.

When he had the scene carefully reconstructed in his mind, the red-haired detective began a foot-by-foot examination of the area. He felt under chair cushions, inside sofa padding, looked into drawers and nooks and corners. He went to his knees and peered under the furniture.

Finally, after fifteen minutes, he straightened up and stood frowning, deep in thought. He had found nothing, and even though he had harbored only the slimmest of hopes, he was still disappointed. Damn! Why hadn't he thought to check Dunkirk's body earlier? He sighed softly, turning.

Jenkins stood just inside the parlor entrance from the hall, a big Colt Woodsman held competently in one of his gnarled hands and a hard expression on his face.

Shayne stiffened. "You'd better put that gun up, Jenkins," he said.

The gun didn't waver for a long moment, and the detective held his breath. Then, slowly, the old caretaker lowered the muzzle and came forward into the room.

"I got up to get a drink of water," Jenkins explained, "and I saw the lights on in here. I went back to my room and got my old Woodsman and came to investigate."

"I was just having a look around."

"In the middle of the night?"

Shayne shrugged. What better time?"

A humorless smile tugged at the old man's mouth. Then he peered closer at the redhead, as if really seeing the condition of Shayne's clothing, the bruises and contusions on his scalp and hands, for the first time.

"What happened to you?" he asked.

"I had a little run-in with someone down in the cellar," the detective answered with some bitterness.

"Who?"

"I don't know. Whoever it was took a few shots at me, and then pushed some crates down on me. I'm lucky to be here at all."

The old caretaker made a whistling sound with his lips. "You detectives lead a pretty rough life, don't you?"

"So you know I'm a detective," Shayne said.

Jenkins nodded. "I heard you tell the guests who you are. I was out in the kitchen."

"You heard everything that was said?"

"Most everything, yes."

"Can you add anything that might help?" Shayne asked. "Something you might have seen, overheard?"

"I've been thinking about that," Jenkins said, "but there's nothing I can remember offhand."

"If you think of anything, you'll let me know?"

"I will," Jenkins promised. "I don't like what's going on in this lodge any more than you do. Mr. Whitmire's been a fair man and a good employer over the years. I don't wish any more trouble on him."

"Thanks, Jenkins."

The old man shuffled out, the Colt Woodsman swinging loosely at his side. Shayne made one more turn around the parlor, still found nothing. He switched out the lights and went quietly upstairs again to his room, dressed his wounds and put on fresh clothes.

Lying once more on his bed in the darkened quarters, listening to the hurricane lashing one another outside, Shayne went over everything in his mind time and again. He mentally reviewed the evidence he had uncovered against Otis Dunkirk, the irrefutable fact that there was an accomplice involved in the Americus Project dealings—and others, as well, over the past few years. He relived the events in the parlor when Dunkirk had died, the conversations he had instigated and those he'd overhead in the boathouse, the deadly falling urn, his movement through the storage room in which the killer had stood, his announcement of who he was and why he was at the lodge, his narrow escape from death in the dark, cold cellar, his discovery that Dunkirk's hearing aid was missing.

At first, all of it swirled together in his mind and appeared to offer no clues at all. Then, as he sifted and sorted the events over and over, certain facts began to grow more important. He dwelt on them, examining them, and suddenly several pieces of the puzzle started to fit together. He didn't have all of it yet, but he had

parts of the answer, enough parts to—

A sharp, echoing roar brought Shayne off the bed to stand listening near the door.

The winds had lessened in their shrieking for a moment, and the sound had come from inside the house, down the hallway. It was a well-known sound to a man with Michael Shayne's years of experience.

A gunshot.

Shayne twisted the key in the lock and jerked open the door. He ran down the hallway to his right, saw other doors opening along the corridor and white faces peering out; the others had heard the explosion too.

"What is it, what's happened?" Ginny Whitmire cried.

"That sounded like a shot!" Dr. Kingsley's voice called out.

"It came from my den!" Secretary Whitmire said, his aristocratic form attired in an old-fashioned nightshirt. "My God, who could be—"

Shayne pushed past the confused throng, running up to the closed door to Whitmire's den. He rattled the knob, found it to be locked from inside. He turned, snapped grimly to Whitmire, "Have you got a key to this door?"

"Yes, I'll get it." The secretary hurried into his room, adjacent to the den on the left hand side of the hallway, the skirts of his nightshirt billowing around his ankles.

Shayne pressed his ear against the door panel, straining to hear some sound within the room. He heard nothing. Then secretary Whitmire was at his elbow, fumbling a key into the latch, turning it. The red-haired detective heard the tumbler click, and he grasped the knob firmly and shoved the door inward, rushing into the room. The others crowded in behind him.

They stared at the sight which struck their eyes, stared in shocked horror at what lay within the palely lamp-lit room. Silence fell like a pall, and then Dr. Kingsley cried out in terrified disbelief, "Oh God, no! No!"

Shayne moved forward to the desk and stood helplessly looking down at the form slumped over its polished surface, one arm flung over the Underwood typewriter. From the nerveless fingers of the other hand dangled a small pearl-handled automatic.

It was Stella Kingsley, and there was a tiny, blood-filled hole in her right temple.

VII

DOCTOR KINGSLEY rushed to the body. "Stella," he cried. If it hadn't been for the restraining hands of Mike Shayne, Kingsley would have taken her in his arms. His eyes were blurred with tears,

and his throat worked spasmodically. "Oh God. . .oh God," he murmured. "Stella. . ."

"She's dead, Doctor. There's nothing more you can do for her." Shayne turned the distraught husband away, keeping himself between Kingsley and his wife. Death, especially a violent death of a loved one, was too grisly a sight under the circumstances.

"Now, get hold of yourself," Shayne said. "This is my job from now on, until we can get the police here."

Numb with shock and grief, Kingsley could only nod. Claire Madison and Ginny came from near the door and took his arms tenderly. He sagged against them, looking as if he'd aged ten years in the ten seconds it had taken for recognition and realization.

"Why, that's my gun!" Whitmire exclaimed. "That's the little automatic I always keep in my desk!"

Shayne intently studied the scene of the slumped woman and the single sheet of white paper rolled in the typewriter. He read the printing, straightened and glanced at the small, pearl-handled automatic dangling by its trigger guard from her limp hand, and then at her wound and the black powder ring around the hole. Then he looked back at the assemblage collected by the door feeling futile and angered. He tugged his left ear-lobe harshly.

Shayne was anything but satisfied, especially as he assimilated the facts before him with the ones he had been mulling over a few minutes before. He let his eyes travel from Whitmire to lovely Claire Madison, her chin trembling as if not entirely able to stem her own inner horror as she tried to calm the doctor.

And then he looked at the young Ginny, who stood far less controlled, shivering in a basic white shorty nightgown which ended just below her slim thighs. Her feet were bare, and one crossed the other in an unconscious, child-like gesture of discomfort. Walter Denton was behind Whitmire, bare-chested and wearing nothing but his pants, his face the color of tallow.

"It would seem," Shayne said slowly, "that Mrs. Kingsley took her own life."

"No! Not Stella!" the doctor cried out, red-rimmed eyes flashing. "She had her problems, her inordinate fears, but she'd never commit suicide! Not Stella!"

"Please, doctor," Claire Madison soothed.

"But she wouldn't have! I know it!"

"There's a note here," Shayne said, turning back to the desk.

He moved Mrs. Kingsley's left

arm down from the typewriter gently, and in doing so a small object clutched in her fist fell to the desk.

It was Dunkirk's hearing-aid. Shayne stared at it in surprise, and then tore the sheet out of the roller. He read the perfectly typed note to the others:

Too much too soon. I fear the future far less than death, and the future holds nothing but death, so I am trapped. The detective snares me at every turn; perhaps his resting place in the cellar will be his last, but I cannot take the chance. . .

"The ravings of a mad woman!" Whitmire exclaimed, breaking in. "What's this about you in the cellar, Shayne?"

In clipped, terse sentences the rangy detective told him and the others of his narrow escape, leaving out most of the details.

Then Shayne continued reading:

. . .Otis was bad, but I couldn't help myself, and I was drawn to him like a moth to a flame. In the end I am consumed, but I snuffed the candle before it could burn another. I am sorry, beloved Giles, for I loved you more and always did. Forgive me. God forgive me.

"Stella!" Kingsley wailed.

"No! She was faithful! Above all, she was faithful."

Denton pushed his way forward. "Dunkirk was murdered, just as I thought. Mrs. Kingsley admits it. 'Snuffed the candle,' she wrote. She was the moth, and Dunkirk the flame—the candle!"

"Yes, Dunkirk was murdered," Shayne agreed. He put the note aside and picked up the hearing aid, turning it over and over in his hand.

"Oh, the poor woman," Claire said sorrowfully.

"She was having an affair with Dunkirk," Whitmire said in a lowered voice to Kingsley, "I'm sorry, Giles, but there's no way of overlooking her confession. She was probably having her

affair with him while we were married as well, if that's any consolation."

Then to the room, Whitmire added, "And she couldn't take the duplicity any longer, killed Otis, attempted to murder Shayne twice, and stricken by grief, guilt, and failure—we'll never know exactly—she shot herself. Tragic. Simply tragic."

"No, no, she couldn't have, I tell you," Kingsley moaned.

Wordlessly, Shayne pried open the back of the hearing-aid. He moved some of the spider-web wires around, loosened the earpiece and examined it.

"It's too bad she didn't include how she killed Mr. Dunkirk," Denton said. "But your hunch is probably correct, Mr. Shayne. My guess is, he was poisoned; women prefer that method. Everybody knows that."

"Mrs. Kingsley didn't have to include that," Shayne said. He had the entire case off the instrument's works now, and had found what he was looking for. He looked at the group, then said in a quiet voice, "I know how he was murdered."

"What?" Whitmire gasped. "How?"

"This hearing aid," Shayne said, holding it up to view. "There's a very small integrated circuit added to the regular components, and a field-effect relay attached to it in turn. There's no question in my mind that the integrated circuit would, when switched on by the relay, emit a supersonic tone, a shriekingly high decibel whistle far above hearing, but shattering the brain. That's why Dunkirk slapped his hands to his head. When it was triggered, the integrated circuit literally scrambled his brains apart in one agonizing fraction of a second."

"Good God!" Claire Madison whispered.

"But but how was it triggered, Mr. Shayne?" Ginny asked.

"Through a remote control device the killer carried. I don't hold many hopes for it being found. It was probably thrown away immediately afterwards, and since it would probably be of the same miniature size as this, it could be anywhere, inside or out of the lodge."

"But we have the hearing aid," Whitmire said, "and that's proof enough."

"This is crazy!" Doctor Kingsley protested. "Stella knew nothing about electronics! Nothing!"

Shayne glanced down at the dead woman again, at the way her long, sharp, blood-red laquered nails were resting on the keyboard as if stilled in their search of keys to strike. He turned back to Kingsley.

"How could she have gotten

in here and locked the door without you knowing about it?" the redhead asked. "Weren't you with her?"

"Of course I was! But you see—well, part of her therapy when she's upset is to write. She loves to write, especially poetry. It soothes her, allows some of the pent-up emotions inside to be expressed harmlessly. She was so, unnerved from the storm and Dunkirk's death that she couldn't sleep. She told me she wanted to go to the bathroom and then in here to find some paper and a pen, and then come right back to bed. I didn't want to disturb Buford, and since Stella knew where everything was kept, I saw nothing wrong with allowing her to."

"Didn't you notice that she was gone a long time?" the redhead asked.

"I—I must have dozed off. I was very tired, very exhausted. The next thing I remember is waking up from the gunshot. But I tell you, this is all wrong! All wrong! Stella *couldn't* have taken her own life!"

Shayne took Whitmire's small automatic from the lifeless fingers, broke open the slide, and then checked the clip. One short fired; one shot was all that was needed. He slipped the clip back into the gun's butt and pocketed the weapon.

"Claire," Whitmire said, "take Giles back to his room so he can rest." He added solemnly, "As if anybody could rest now."

"No," Shayne said. "No, I think it would be best if we all stayed together."

"But—"

"Please do as I say, Mr. Whitmire," the detective said. "It's important."

Shayne glanced over the heads of the others, saw the shocked, pale features of the caretaker standing in the shadows of the hallway. "Jenkins, would you go and make some coffee and see what you can do to stir up the fire?"

"I'll help him," Claire offered. "Ginny? Can you help Doctor Kingsley by yourself?"

"I'll be fine," the doctor said softly. "Please, let's all go downstairs and do whatever Shayne wants us to do. I couldn't bear going back in that bedroom right now, anyway."

They slowly, silently, trouped down the stairs to the parlor, the redhead the last of the group. He stopped on the steps for a moment, the puzzle now firmly together in his head. The pieces he had moved around while lying on his bed combined with the latest events into a total picture of ruthless murder, a portrait of a killer far more deranged than anybody could have considered poor Mrs. Kingsley.

VIII

JENKINS WAS stacking cordwood in the Inglenook fireplace when Shayne and the others entered the parlor. Claire Madison was just coming through the swinging kitchen doors, a quilted bathrobe now covering her floor-length pink peignoir.

As everyone except Shayne took seats, the lovely fiancee said to the caretaker, "I've put water on for coffee, Jenkins. You'll have to watch it."

"Yes, ma'am." He got the fire going in the fireplace, and then left the room silently.

Shayne put his back to the warming heat of the blaze, as he had earlier in the evening, and surveyed the taut, frightened faces of the assemblage. None except Whitmire met his steady, sharp gaze—all were lost with their private fears, their private hells.

Standing there, Shayne carefully arranged his thoughts into the proper sequences, wanting no mistakes and no avenues of escape from which the killer to wriggle. He tugged at his ear-lobe impatiently, but didn't begin until Jenkins had returned with a tray laden with cups and the same silver pot of earlier in the evening.

No one seemed particularly interested in the coffee, and the old caretaker placed the tray on a sideboard, and then stood quietly there.

"All right," Shayne said at last, "I've got a few things to say to all of you, so you might as well give me your attention." He waited, watching the eyes of the guests turn to him.

On his left were Doctor Kingsley, his eyes haunted and his features those of a hundred-year-old man. Walter Denton had found a blanket somewhere and had it draped over his upper torso, and he was shivering as if with a chill. On the redhead's right were Claire Madison, apprehensive and wan; Ginny Whitmire, appearing very young and very little-girl-lost; and Secretary Whitmire, his hands clenched into fists at his sides and his face seeming as if it had been stretched downward like an old rubber mask. Jenkins, on the periphery of the detective's vision, was immobile as a gnarled statue.

"The death tonight of Stella Kingsley," Shayne said, "would tend to explain everything that's happened here at the lodge. In her suicide note, she confessed to killing Dunkirk and making two attempts on my life, once with the Hutter urn and once down in the cellar. She also, in a vague sense, confessed to being Dunkirk's accomplice on the kickbacks through Secretary Whitmire's office."

The redhaired detective paused for a moment, and then went on, "The fact of the matter is, Stella Kingsley's death doesn't explain away anything. It only complicates the situation."

"What do you mean by that, Shayne?" Whitmire asked.

"Just this: Stella Kingsley didn't commit suicide," Shayne said. "She was murdered."

"What!" Whitmire snapped.

"I knew it!" Giles Kingsley said. "I told you she was murdered. Poor Stella would never have done that to herself."

"How do you know Stella was murdered?" Claire Madison asked.

"Several reasons," Shayne said softly. "First, Mrs. Kingsley had very long, sharp fingernails. It's extremely difficult to hit the keys of a typewriter, especially the old stiff keys of that portable upstairs, with fingernails such as that without breaking or chipping the nails or their lacquer. And yet, Mrs. Kingsley's nails were in excellent shape, the lacquer untarnished.

"Secondly, that suicide note was perfectly typed, not a single misspelling, typo, or misplaced punctuation mark. Neatly and professionally done. Tell me, Doctor Kingsley, did your wife know how to type?"

Kingsley's face was congealed with emotion. "No," he replied. "No, she didn't."

"I didn't think so," Shayne said. "Not when you told me she'd gone into the den looking for paper and a pen to do her writing. If Mrs. Kingsley wrote out her poetry longhand, why wouldn't she write out her suicide note the same way?"

No one answered, but all eyes remained on the detective. There was a funereal hush over the room, punctuated only by the shrieking of the hurricane outside and the low crackling of the fire in the hearth behind Shayne.

The redhead continued, "No person distraught enough to be

on the verge of taking his own life would deviate from a habit pattern of long-standing. If Mrs. Kingsley had really written that note, she would have written it longhand. But even if she *had* typed it, for some unexplainable reason, the odds are that she couldn't have done so *perfectly*, without a mistake, in an overwrought condition in a palely lit room when she didn't even know how to type!"

Whitmire said, "You're right, Shayne. It doesn't seem possible!"

"But what about the locked door?" Denton asked. "It was locked from the inside—and there was no one in there except Mrs. Kingsley's body when we all entered from the hall."

The detective smiled tightly. "I'll clear that up a little later."

"Whoever killed Stella must have been the one who murdered Dunkirk, then," Kingsley said with painful reflection. "And that person must be Dunkirk's real accomplice on the briberies."

"That's right."

"But—who is it, Shayne? Which one of us—"

"In theory, it could be any of you," Shayne said. "But let's begin a process of elimination. Who had the opportunity not only to kill Dunkirk and Stella Kingsley, but to make those two attempts on my life tonight? We can eliminate several of you right away, I think, on just one of those occasions."

"Which one is that?" Claire Madison asked.

"The attempt on me with the Hutter urn. I climbed into the rear storage room where the killer awaited for me to return from the boathouse, only seconds after the urn was pushed down at me. There's dust across the floor of that room, and tracks are clearly outlined there."

"You mean you can identify the killer by his footprints?" Whitmire said incredulously.

"I didn't say that," Shayne corrected. "The tracks are unclear and distorted, mixed in with mine and Jenkins when he took the urn in earlier, when the storm first broke."

"Then—"

"I only said that we could *eliminate* several of you, not prove which of you is the murderer," Shayne explained. "There was no wetness to the tracks nor in the dust leading from the window to the door."

"Wetness?" Whitmire asked impatiently. "Shayne, what are you—?"

The detective held up his hand. "All the killer did was open the window slightly, place the urn on the sill, and at the proper moment give it a push. The killer would have stood back

away from the window, so as to avoid getting wet from the wind and rain howling outside. So, in the flight across the room, the killer was obviously dry, had dry feet, dry clothing, dry hair.

"But only minutes before, Secretary Whitmire, you and I, Walter Denton and your daughter, had been out in the boathouse. We had to brave the elements to get there and back to the house, and all of us were soaking wet. I was only in the boathouse about ten minutes after you returned to the lodge here, hardly enough time for one of you to get completely dry, go up to the storage room, and lie in wait for me. The same goes for Jenkins, if he was ever under any suspicion, since he'd just returned from driving to the bridge when we rushed out to the boathouse—and he was still wet when I saw him minutes after the urn episode."

"By God, Shayne," Kingsley said, "that only leaves—"

"I know who it leaves, doctor. You, for one. But you spent at least part of the time treating Ginny Whitmire's head wound, applying that bandage to it that she now wears. The rest of the time, you were with Jenkins upstairs. I overheard the two of you when I returned to my room after the urn business, talking in the room next door, and you'd apparently been in there for some time. I suspect you came upstairs and collared Jenkins right after treating Ginny. Is that right?"

"Why, yes, but—"

Shayne took several steps forward, knowing that the time had come for the actual unmasking of the murderer. He stood in front of the killer, saw the fear and hate and malice in the dark eyes. He said coldly, "That leaves only you, doesn't it? You're the murderer, the one who killed Dunkirk and snuffed out poor Mrs. Kingsley in a last desperate effort to get out from under. You—Claire Madison!"

IX

THE LOVELY BLONDE recoiled, her eyes bright saucers of fear, her face distorted.

"No," she said, "no, you don't know what you're saying!"

"Have you lost your senses, Shayne?" Whitmire erupted, stepping forward a pace incredulously.

The red-haired detective waved him to silence, impatient to wrap up this case, to fasten the final link to the merciless killer he stared at with cold attention.

"Listen to me," he snapped. "I—"

"By God, I don't have to," Whitmire roared. "I won't have you accusing Claire this way!

The only thing I want to hear from you, Shayne, is an apology."

"You *will* listen," Shayne snapped back. "I'll use the same tests on Miss Madison that I used on the others. I cleared the others. If your fiancee is innocent, then what I have to say will prove it."

Shayne slowly turned. "First," he began, "the attempt on my life with the falling urn was done before I had publicly disclosed who I was, and supposedly only Secretary Whitmire knew my identity."

"Dunkirk's accomplice, whoever it is, could have known," Whitmire interjected. "I don't see how that proves—"

"Answer one thing, Mr. Secretary," Shayne said. "Was Miss Madison at your home with you when you called me last Thursday?"

"Yes, she was. But—"

"Don't you see? The accomplice had to know one important detail, that I had the proof and you were going to use it to expose Dunkirk on Monday. Dunkirk didn't have the extra time he thought he had. The only time we mentioned that was Thursday morning on the phone, when you were calling from your home.

"Until I arrived at the lodge, the killer had only one opportunity to learn that everything was over. In your home, and you yourself told me that the phone lines had just been checked for wire-taps and were clean. It could only have been Claire Madison. She overheard you, perhaps listening at the door, perhaps on the extension. She was in a perfect position to know exactly what you have been planning—and has been all along, while working for you and as your fianceè."

"Buford, are you going to allow this?" she cried out.

Whitmire clenched his fist. "Shayne, there has to be another reason for the killer knowing about Dunkirk."

"There isn't. But it's only one part of the whole. All right, Dunkirk had to be killed. Murdering you and me would double the risk and not necessarily suppress the evidence. Moreover, the accomplice had already taken the necessary precautions by switching the hearing aid on Dunkirk with the lethal one, a premeditated scheme to insure that the link between them could be silenced if and when necessary. That took time and took closeness—perhaps intimacy—with Dunkirk, and electronic knowledge, or friends in the electronics industry. I'll bet that if we check back into Miss Madison's background, we'll find not only a previous acquaintanceship with Dunkirk,

but some connection with electronics."

Whitmire's face turned a sickly pallor, as if all the blood had suddenly rushed from it. Shayne saw it, and he smiled mirthlessly. "I was right, Mr. Secretary? What did she do before working for you?"

"She was a secretary at Trident Components, but damn it, man, that still is no proof! I won't believe that she would do such a thing!"

Shayne tugged his left earlobe. "Let's move on. She's here, so is Dunkirk. Not the best of possible times to kill a man, what with so many witnesses around, but considering the close timing, she had no choice. Dunkirk dies, and then I start nosing around. She figures I have to be eliminated, sees her chance, and drops that Hutter urn on me. Remember how I explained why Jenkins, you, Ginny and Walter Denton couldn't have been the ones because of the dry floor? Well, turning it around, Claire Madison *could* have been the one because she hadn't gone outside. She was completely dry. And she has no alibi."

"That's not so!" the blonde fianceè retorted. "I was in the kitchen, making coffee! I told you that—"

"Excuse me," Shayne said. "*Unsubstantiated* alibi, if you prefer. Nobody recalls seeing

you, and it's only your word that you were there the whole time."

"Her word is enough for me," Whitmire snapped.

"She could have sneaked up the back stairs, no one the wiser, after you, Ginny, and Denton returned from the boathouse. Later, she went to remove the hearing-aid, and that led to the second attempt on my life in the cellar. Making good her escape, she took the hearing-aid while I was unconscious and hurried upstairs. Again, no one would have seen her; she had her own room, and all she had to do was act as if she had been asleep the whole time. She was protected by the cover of five other similar alibis. Unfortunately she ran into Stella Kingsley, who had left her room in search of pen and paper, in the hallway."

"Shayne, I refuse—"

The redhead ignored Whitmire this time, turning his attention directly on the glaring woman beside him.

"It was easy for you, wasn't it?" he said to her harshly. "You knew where the paper was kept as well as she did, and the two of you went into the study, Stella unknowingly walking to her death. She had to die because she'd seen you, would blow your story of being asleep the minute she was asked.

"But that wasn't the only reason, was it? You saw the perfect opportunity to make her death seem a suicide, using the automatic that you both would have known would be in the desk, setting it up so as to clear you of any suspicion, labeling her as an adulterous, accomplice, and murderer. You carefully typed the note under cover of the storm—*too* carefully, as I've already pointed out, though not for a touch-typist secretary as yourself—in the same odd, poetic style of Stella's. Then you waited for a lull in the storm to shoot her."

"You don't have any proof!" Claire Madison said shrilly.

"Yes, I have. The shot was fired and you locked the door. Then you hid behind it, joining the others as we poured in. I know what you did, because I didn't see you in the hall, but there you were suddenly in the room! You didn't come in afterwards, and you could only have been where you were if you'd been hiding.

"And one other thing, the final, bitter piece that's going to send you to jail," Shayne said. "Downstairs, in the cellar are wooden crates with bullets in them. When ballistics gets finished with them, they'll match the—"

The detective lunged at Claire Madison, seeing the sudden flicker in her eyes as her hand dove for the pocket of her quilted robe. He got one hand locked on her wrist when Buford Whitmire, still intent on defending his fianceè's supposed honor, grappled with Shayne, bursting between the redhead and Miss Madison.

"Stop it! Stop it!" he shouted, enraged to the point of hysteria. "Keep your hands off of her!"

Shayne, already off balance, was forced to step backwards, releasing her wrist. Then Claire Madison was away, and in her right hand was a blue-steel Browning automatic.

"Claire! What—"

"Don't move, Buford, *darling,*" she said with contempt. Then, to Shayne: "Match the bullets in this gun, Mr. Detective? Is that what you were going to say?"

"Yes," Shayne said. "The gun

you tried to use on me, and then put in your robe pocket when you ostensibly left the study a few minutes ago to help Jenkins with the coffee and fire."

"Well, don't try to take it away, or the ballistics will match one in you as well," she threatened. "And that goes for all of you," she added, waving the automatic around the room.

Denton whispered what Whitmire was too overwhelmed to manage, "Then. . .then what Mr. Shayne said is true! You did murder Mr. Dunkirk and Mrs. Kingsley."

"Claire!" Whitmire cried in shocked horror.

"Little man, don't look so sad," she said in mockery. "It really is all your fault, you know. If you hadn't been so overbearingly honest and righteous, in another couple of months Otis and I would have gone our seperate ways and nobody would have died. I can't see all the fuss. It wasn't your money, after all."

"Claire, I loved you. Doesn't that mean anything?"

"Money is the only thing that matters to me. And I've got a bundle stashed away after all the kick-backs and briberies Otis and I split. And I'm going to use it, too." Her eyes narrowed into slits. "I'm going to start living the way I've always wanted to, a life of ease.

"It's taken a long time, a long time of working my way into your confidence, Buford, becoming on the inside of everything so that I could take advantage of your silly projects. And it's worked, and I'm not giving up anything, not when all I have to do is get away."

"You won't get away," Shayne said.

"Won't I? What are you going to do to stop me?"

Kingsley, his jaw tightly clenched in pure wrath and anguish, slowly rose from his chair like an animated robot, his face gnarled with hatred. "You killed my Stella," he growled. "You bitch!"

"Hold it, Doctor," Claire Madison ordered, swinging her automatic to point it directly at him. He stopped, a rigid statue of insensate fury. "I'm sorry about Stella, Doctor, I really am, but it was a matter of her or me. Please understand, I had to do it."

Shayne, with the woman's attention shifted momentarily, reached for the small automatic that he'd retrieved from Mrs. Kingsley's hand and put it into his pocket. Before he could use it, Claire Madison had swung back to him. "And you, Shayne, take that gun out carefully, using your thumb and forefinger only."

The detective did as she commanded, still hoping she had overlooked his own pistol. "You

can't shoot us all, Claire. You shot at me five times in the cellar; a Browning .380 like you have only holds six shots. You have one bullet left. And there's six of us."

"The other gun now, Shayne," she ordered calmly. "And before you get your hopes up too high, when I went up the back stairs to get my robe and gun, I reloaded it. It has a full magazine, one for each of you, if necessary."

"You—you'd murder us all in cold blood?" Ginny asked.

"I said, if necessary." She crossed to Whitmire, holding the muzzle of the Browning to his midsection. "All right, kick the guns over here."

When he had obeyed, she stooped, still holding the automatic on the secretary, and picked them up, dropping them in her robe's pockets.

"Buford and I are taking a little walk. There's one way off this wretched island, and that's in the boat, and I'm going to take it. Eventually you'll be rescued, but by that time I'll be long gone."

"But the storm! You'll never make it!" Whitmire cried.

Claire didn't answer. She took one, last, piercing glance around the group. "And the rest of you, stay put. If I hear any of you coming, I'll shoot Buford. If you try and stop me in the boat-house, I'll kill whoever comes through the door. Understand?"

She prodded the resisting but still stunned figure of the politician toward the hallway, and then they were gone from sight.

Shayne heard the two of them head for the back door along the hall, then that door opened and banged against the house.

"Shayne! What are we going to do?" Kingsley asked horrified.

The detective crossed hurriedly to the side window. And he drew the heavy draperies aside angrily, saw the blurred forms of Claire Madison and Whitmire leaving the house on their way to the shimmering black hulk of a boathouse.

Shayne suddenly remember something. "Damnation! I've the key to the boat! I took it along with the gas tank.

"You what?" Ginny asked in a small voice.

"She might kill Buford!" the doctor shouted, but already Shayne was running to the kitchen doors; he *had* to stop Claire Madison before she struck again, in rage and frustration.

He hit the steps of the porch, unmindful of the rain which slashed at him, and the blinding wind which cascaded against him, almost throwing him down.

Ahead of him, Whitmire, his arm over his face, and Claire

Madison, the automatic still aimed, struggled to the boat-house, oblivious of everything except the battering, banshee-howling hurricane.

Gritting his teeth, Shayne plunged after them, slipping precariously in the mud. As if more sensing his pursuit than hearing or seeing it, the woman turned, stopping and waving the automatic threateningly at him.

And then Shayne saw something which made the detective cry out and gesture frantically. Near the boat-house one of the big Australian pines was whipping crazily in the wind, bending at such an angle that Shayne knew instinctively it was ready to fall. Slowly, as if viewing a stop-motion film, he watched as the huge tree wavered, then tilted forward in an easy, utterly silent drop.

"Father!" Shayne heard from behind him, and Ginny Whitmire came off the porch waving and screaming in hysterical warning.

Whitmire looked up just in time. He leaped to one side in a sprawling dash for safety. Claire Madison was too intent on warding off the danger she saw in Shayne's presence to notice the tree until it was too late.

The long shadow of the pine closed over her like a shroud, obliterating her from view. If she ever had the chance to scream, her last cry was cut off by the hurricane and the thunderous, crashing shock of the timber hitting earth.

"Retribution," Shayne said grimly, and then he joined the young girl as Ginny ran across the marshy field to her father.

X

THE SHRIEKING hurricane winds began to abate less than an hour after the treacherous Claire Madison died under the crushing weight of the uprooted pine. The rain slackened to a light drizzle, and then disappeared altogether, and the savagely swirling air grew pacified once again. The ominous black clouds in the night sky split and separated, revealing a few shining stars; the eastern horizon promised a clear dawn.

Inside the lodge, the atmosphere was one of tragedy and silence. Secretary Whitmire, his world having collapsed around him with the betrayal and death of the woman he loved, had gone to bed after being given a sedative by Doctor Kingsley.

Kingsley himself had taken an opiate to try to rest, his own world tragically altered by the calculated murder of his wife, Stella. Ginny Whitmire and Walter Denton had gone upstairs to console one another, their feelings one for the other apparently much deeper now that the ordeal has tested them

The red-haired detective and the old caretaker, Jenkins, were left alone in the now-quiet parlor. To them had fallen the unpleasant task of transferring the body of Stella Kingsley into one of the unused bedrooms, and they had been the ones to ascertain that Claire Madison had failed to survive the falling pine. Not being able to lift the weight of the tree, they had been forced to leave the blonde woman's remains under the sodden branches; removing her would be up to the authorities when they finally arrived at the lodge.

Shayne sat on the sofa, staring moodily into a large snifter of cognac which Jenkins had poured for him. The caretaker drank sour mash, neat, and neither man spoke, letting silence build in the old, dark house. The glowing embers in the Inglenook fireplace, dying for the second time that night, crackled occasionally to provide the only break in the stillness.

After a long time, Shayne released a breath and drank deeply of his cognac. When the warm brandy had settled in his stomach, he said to Jenkins, "Do you think the lake will be calm enough for us to leave here by dawn?"

"I think so," the caretaker answered. "We can all of us fit in the cruiser, I expect, and I'll take us around the point and across to the Skidmore place. Far as I know they were home for the weekend, and they'd have ridden out the hurricane like we did. We can use one of their cars to drive into Greenville."

The Miami detective nodded, drank again. "It'll be good to get back to civilization," he said.

"Yeah," Jenkins said, understanding. "You know, Mr. Shayne, this used to be a mighty peaceful place to live—a place a man could be proud to work at and call his home. But it'll never be the same now, not after that hurricane and everything that happened. I don't figure I'll be staying on here."

"I guess I don't blame you," Shayne said.

"Must be hell to want money so bad you have to kill and lie and steal to get it," the old caretaker observed.

"It must be, all right."

"Another drink, Mr. Shayne?" Jenkins asked, indicating the bottles on the sideboard. "It's going to be a long wait till morning, and I don't think I'm going to sleep anyway."

Mike Shayne drained his snifter, extended it.

"Yes," he answered, "thanks, Jenkins. I could use another drink. I doubt if I'd be able to sleep, either."

The old caretaker poured, and the two men sat in silence again, waiting for a new day to be born.

His tribal fathers could summon forth magic. Could he read a dead man's message — and bring a sneering killer back to justice?

Eaglehawk

by REUBEN F. VIGIL

LANCE EAGLEHAWK, of the Tewa Indian Tribal Police, stood at the window of headquarters

looking outside. His gaze was fixed on the Indian dancers gyrating on the Pueblo Square in the center of the Indian village of St. Gerome.

Today was the feast of St. Gerome, patron saint of the tribe. The dancers, garbed in exotic costumes, were doing the Eagle Dance in his honor.

The breeze that came up at intervals floated the chanting of the dancers and the beat of the tomtoms inside the room. It was late summer.

Lance lit a cigarette and exhaled slowly, relishing the smoke. "What will be, will be," he mused as the refrains from the song of that name crossed his mind. He stood dragging at his cigarette. *One can never tell about rumors*, he thought. The last one was still floating around, rearing its ugly head in the reservation.

If it has not been for that rumor, Lance reflected, he would have been off today. He'd be out there mingling with the celebrants on the square, partaking of the festivities now going on under the brilliant New Mexico sunshine pouring down from an immense blue sky.

But the rumor had upset those plans. It had finally reached the sensitive ears of the Law Branch of the Bureaus of Indian Affairs where the impact of its ominous undertones was felt and the law branch became worried. For it was feared that narcotics were being introduced into the Indian Reservation. The quiet and thorough investigation that had followed did not allay those fears. Nothing of evidence was uncovered and the ominous rattling quieted a little but did not entirely subside. All police leave was cancelled, and Lance found himself tied to his job.

He finally moved away and settled his lean frame in the swivel chair behind his desk, shifting his attention to the young couple standing in front, waiting.

He blew another cloud of smoke and tossed a glance to the blond youth, a non-Indian, hippy type. The man was toying nervously with his love beads, a strand of silver medallions wrapped around his neck.

"Mister Randall," Lance said, "suppose we go over the whole thing once more. Let's take it from the top. Now, you came here to headquarters—"

"To report a man missing!" Randall put in hastily.

"My husband," the young woman interrupted, "failed to show up last night!" She was Indian and her name was Maria.

"William Tate," Randall continued, "Maria's husband, has been now missing for two days. We're afraid for him."

There was a long pause. Lance

sat smoking quietly, shifting his gaze from one to the other. The beady eyes that peered at them from behind the cloud of smoke were like two tiny black pools veiled in mystery.

Their gaze was sharp and penetrating, taking in every detail and missing nothing.

"Why are you afraid for him?" Lance suddenly dropped his gaze to the beads in the man's nervous hands and frowned. Randall became aware and put both hands in his pockets.

"He left his pick-up truck behind," Randall said. "And the ignition key was turned on. When I tried to start it this morning, the battery was dead."

"I see." Lance turned to Maria. "And why did you wait so long to report this?"

Maria flushed. "I thought my husband had taken one of the horses and ridden out to look after the stock," she said. "When he failed to show up this morning, I got worried. I went over to Randall and told him about it!"

"Has he ever stayed out overnight before?"

"Never!"

Lance turned to Randall. "What is the relationship between you and these people?"

Randall spread out both hands, palms upward.

"Tate is my landlord, Captain," he replied. "When Maria came to me with her story, I suggested we come to you."

Lance Eaglehawk mulled this over, studying the youth. Finally he turned to Maria. "What does your husband do for a living?"

Maria became indignant. "You know what he does, Captain!" she cried in Indian. "You've known us both for a long time!"

Lance was adamant. "I still want you to tell me!" he countered, his voice rising. "In English!"

"He runs a few head of cattle and raises hogs," she replied in that language.

The fire in the beady eyes flickered and went out. He turned to Randall. "How long have you been living in the reservation?"

The youth shrugged his shoulders. "Since last spring," he said. "I have the approval of the pueblo governor and his council. Anything wrong with that?"

Lance shook his head. "None whatsoever," he said, matter-of-factly. "The line of questioning is a mere formality, part of all procedure in police work." He blew another cloud of smoke, studying the youth as he did. "Tell me," he finally said, "why do you prefer living here, when there are more advantages to be had back in the city?"

Randall sighed wearily. "I am gathering material on India

lore," came the vexed answer. "I am going back to my studies in the fall."

"Then you did not attend school last year?"

Randall shook his head. "No," he answered, "I spent the entire fall and the early part of this year abroad, with a group of other students."

"Where abroad?"

Randall sighed again. This time his eyes flashed with irritation.

"India!" he said, the tone tempered with an edge of contempt. A cloud of ill-concealed anger swept across his face, but Lance remained consistent.

"Is that where you got those medallions?" he asked.

The cloud passed, leaving the face blank. Lance thought he detected a gleam of fear in the grey eyes.

"Those medallions," he went on, as the Randall hesitated, "bring back memories. Could they be a copy from the frescoes of the Hindu temple at Kanarak?"

The youth reacted, bewildered. "How did you know?"

"I've been there," Lance said casually. "Compliments of the CIA. May I see them?"

Randall remained staring for a moment. Then he undid the necklace from around his neck and handed it to Lance, who fondled it gently in his strong brown hands, examining each medallion closely. Yes, he thought, every minute detail depicted on the frescoes had been worked out to its minute detail. Each medallion depicted faithfully each of the twenty-seven classic positions of love, detailed on those walls in far-off India.

The medallions were silver, but the spacers, consisting of pairs, were of some solidified vegetable substance, tinted bright green. One of the spacers was broken, the piece missing. Lance contemplated the white jagged nick and frowned. He bent down for a closer scrutiny and the sneeze came. He sneezed the second time. It became contagious, until he cleared his nose in his handkerchief, and the seizure passed.

Now he knew! He daubed at his nose with a handkerchief, muttering as he did.

"I am sorry," he apologized to no one in particular. He finally put the handkerchief in his pocket and turned to Randall. "It's that time of year when allergies come around." He handed the necklace back and complimented the unknown craftsman. "A marvelous piece of work," he said. "Erotic, but still a masterpiece."

Static came over the radio and an urgent voice came through:

"Sergeant Robinson calling headquarters! Over!" The message was repeated three times before Lance picked up the mike. He depressed the ON switch and barked into the mouthpiece. "This is headquarters! Captain Eaglehawk here! Come in! Over!"

"A disturbance broke out in the square!" the voice of the sergeant continued. "Everything is now under control. Am holding two outsiders and one local, awaiting instructions. Over!"

A cloud of annoyance swept across Lance's face. "Lock them up!" he snapped into the mike. "Let them simmer down for a while. Meanwhile, round up Captain Baca and his mounted patrol. Tell him we have a man missing! William Tate. Have him meet me at Tate's place as soon as possible! Over!"

"Will do! Roger and out!"

Lance put down the mike and darted a glance at the clerk shuffling papers behind his desk.

"Tom!" Lance said, "get me the FBI agent in Santa Fe on the phone!"

The clerk reached for the phone and began to dial. Randall turned from the clerk to Lance, an inquiring glint in his eye.

"The FBI!" he gasped. "I thought you were going to handle this!"

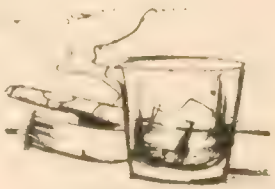
"I am!" Lance said, in a crisp voice. "But whenever someone living in the reservation disappears and foul play is suspected, Mister Hoover and his boys become directly involved."

Randall was speechless. "Captain," he finally managed, "I don't want to turn this into a federal case!"

"You did report a man missing!" Lance said.

"True, but—"

"And you suspect foul play is involved?"



The clerk called, interrupting the conversation.

"Agent Banks is on the line, Captain!" he broke in.

Lance picked up his own extension, motioning to Randall for silence.

"Banks?" he said into the mouthpiece. "Eaglehawk here! How are you?. . .A man has just been reported missing. . .William Tate. . .Two days. . .There is a strong possibility he may have met up with foul play. . .Yes, this could very well tie in with that other matter. Like in powder. . .P-O-W-D-E-R!" Lance Eaglehawk spelled out the word. "Very well! We'll meet at Tate's

place in forty minutes then. So long!"

He replaced the receiver back in its cradle and turned to Randall and Maria. "That was the FBI," he said. "The three of us are going to your place, Maria. Right away."

It was much later that same morning. The three of them were bunched in a tiny knot around the abandoned pick-up in the yard of the Tate ranch. Lance was squatting on his heels, surveying the windswept grounds and frowning as he did. His black gaze made a lazy three hundred and sixty degree sweep of the grounds and finally came to rest on the pole fence. Here, the drift sand was ramped high against its side.

It was obvious to Lance that the sandstorm that had come up last night had covered all signs of tracks. He sighed wearily and cursed under his breath. He finally stood up and walked to the truck and leaned against the driver's side, where he began to brood.

It was the sharp pounding of horse hooves against the ground that snapped him out of the mood. He looked up at the same time Maria and Randall did, and saw the posse, with Captain Baca in the lead, ride through the main gate and head towards them.

The posse, formed of volunteers, pulled up in front. Baca sat his horse, a nervous black, calling out "Howdy," as his black eyes made a swift sweep of the grounds. "Quite a storm we had last night," he said to no one in particular, and turned to Eagle-hawk.

Lance nodded. "That it was," he conceded, "and one man is missing."

Captain Baca bit his lower lip. "Any clues?" he asked.

Lance shook his head. "None," he answered. "I don't like it."

Baca darted another glance at the grounds and shook his head sadly.

"I know what you mean," he said. He jerked a thumb over his shoulders, indicating his men. "Ten is all I could round up, Lance," he apologized. "The others are participating in the dance back in the pueblo."

Lance nodded. "That will do," he said. "And I appreciate all this, Captain. Now, here is what we are up against." He related what he had learned from Randall and Maria.

"Since the ignition was left turned on," he concluded, "we can surmise that Tate was jumped and killed and buried somewheres nearby. Therefore I want you men to search every arroyo and under every sage-brush for a body." His gaze swept the ring of faces and came

back to Captain Baca, where it held fast. "Any questions?"

Baca frowned. "I am afraid that storm covered whatever tracks there were."

"By the same token," Lance said, "it could have uncovered others!"

Baca stopped frowning, and hope glimmered in his eyes.

"You may be right," he said. A faint grin broke around the corners of his mouth. "We'll do our best," he promised. He straightened in the saddle and whirled on his men. "Each of us will take a route and work our way towards the foothills in the west," he barked. "And meet at Pine Springs. Let's go!"

Lance watched the men ride away, and turned to Maria. "You may go home, Maria," he told her. "I am through with you." He watched her until she disappeared inside the house.

He turned to Randall. "I have a few more questions I want to ask you," he said. "Suppose we go to your place."

Randall shrugged and led the way to an adobe shack of sorts behind the main house.

"You have a good style," Lance commented some time later. He was standing in front of an easel studying a watercolor landscape in the combination living room and studio that Randall had put up after his own fashion. "You have a touch for composition and shadows."

"Thanks," Randall said. He was sitting on a couch off to one side. "But I am afraid it's only a hobby."

Lance walked away and examined a charcoal sketch on the adobe wall.

"Were you and Tate close?" he asked, contemplating the pastoral scene.

Randall reached for his beads again.

"No," he replied. "Tate was a loner. However, our relationship was on a higher level than that between the average lessor and lessee."

Captain Baca walked in and stood with his back to the closed door. He nodded and Lance walked over.

Baca leaned closer. "You were right," he whispered *sotto voce.* "The wind did uncover something!"

"The body?"

Baca nodded. "We found it at the bottom of the first arroyo. Near the windmill. We also found this!"

He extended his fist and opened it, disclosing a bright green object cradled in the palm of his hand. It was the missing piece of the broken spacer!

There was a long pause as the two looked at one another.

"Where?" Lance whispered, breaking the silence.

"In the hands of the corpse," Baca said.

"Again a vacuum of silence ensued. During the pause, the chanting of the dancers and the throbbing of the tom-toms were wafted by the desert air from the Pueblo square a mile away. Finally the purring of an automobile engine outside intruded and brought the two men back to the present. The motor was cut off and a car door slammed shut. There was a knock on the door. Lance looked up and bade whoever it was to enter.

The man who came in was tall and in his early forties. He stood with his back to the door appraising the interior of the room and its three occupants, with an air of nonchalance. Finally his lips parted in a crooked grin and he walked towards Eaglehawk.

"Afternoon, Lance," he greeted.

Lance nodded. "Afternoon, Banks," he said, and proceeded to introduce the FBI agent to Captain Baca and Randall.

"Mister Randall," he added, "is the man who came to my office and reported William Tate missing," Lance paused, then dropped his bombshell. "I am therefore accusing Mister Randall of murder!"

The bombshell left a ringing in all ears, interrupted at intervals by the rising and falling of the throbbing of the distant drums.

"And the proof?" Banks broke the silence.

Lance nodded, indicating Captain Baca at his side. "The captain and his men just found the body," he told Banks.

Randall flared up. "That's no proof!" he cried.

Lance whirled on him, his eyes hard. "What about this?" he said. He shoved his closed fist forward and opened it, disclosing the green object in his hand.

Randall's reaction gave him away. His hands went for the necklace around his neck. his fingers groping, accounting for each spacer. They touched the broken one, and froze.

Lance nodded and turned to Banks, proffering the broken piece in his hand.

"If you will try to fit this piece to that one in the necklace," he said, "you will find that both match. This was found in the hands of the corpse."

Three grim faces turned to Randall and waited. He looked up to meet the challenge, but failed. Instead, he sighed wearily and his shoulders sagged heavily in defeat.

"It was an unavoidable accident," he said.

"Mister Randall," Lance was the first to speak, "before you go any farther, I must advise you of

your constitutional rights as set forth by—"

Randall flared up. "I know my rights!" he shouted, interrupting. "And I am sick and tired of the whole crap!"

Lance Eaglehawk waited for a moment. Then: "How did it happen?" he asked.

Randall took his time. When he finally answered, his voice was more subdued.

"He was having trouble starting his pick-up," he said slowly. "And when I offered to help, he shoved me aside, calling me an animal. I resented that and took a swing at him and he fought back. He was tough for a little guy. We wrestled and during the struggle, I managed to shove him hard against the bumper, where he hit his head. He laid there very still. I finally knelt down and felt his wrist for a pulse. There was none. His neck was broken."

Randall sighed deeply as he continued, "I guess I panicked then. I picked up the body and carried it away and buried it where it was found."

Lance scratched his chin. "Did Maria help you?" he asked.

Randall shook his head. "No," he replied.

"Is that all?" Lance asked again.

Randall nodded. "It was an accident, I tell you!"

"Perhaps," Lance told him.

Randall glared hotly, his eyes flashing a mixture of contempt and defiance. "You can't prove otherwise!" he challenged.

"I will!" Lance snapped at the dare. "Now suppose you stop lying and admit you've been pushing dope!" Lance had dropped his second bombshell. Again it created an aftermath of a vacuum of silence.

"Let me make an educated guess," Lance said, breaking the silence. "Tate discovered you were smuggling dope across the border. Being a square, as most decent people are called these days, he didn't like it. Therefore, he threatened you with exposure, something you did not like! You got scared. You didn't know what to do. Physically Tate was a little guy, not more than five feet three, but suddenly he had become a giant, a menace looming ten feet tall, casting a long shadow over your well-being. You became more nervous when you suddenly realized that shadow was not going to fade away unless its owner was done away with! And that's exactly what you did, you killed him! Isn't that how it really was?"

Lance faced Banks and proffered the broken piece in his hand. "If you examine this piece of spacer more closely," he said, "you will find that it is made of solidified hashish!"

Banks turned to Lance, his

face grim. "Let me see that!" he snapped. He took the green object and put it close to his nose and sniffed. He ran his tongue over the jagged white nick and made a wry face. He looked up. "You are right!" he said. "How long have you known?"

"Since I first examined the necklace in my office this morning," Lance said.

"But how?" Banks cried, bewildered.

"I know what you are thinking," Lance said. "But since murder and dope go hand in hand, I decided to play a waiting game, hoping that Randall would lead us to the body. And that he did."

Banks daubed at his mouth with a handkerchief, then put it in his pocket. "Is that what you were trying to tell me over the phone when you spelled out the word powder?"

Lance nodded. "Exactly!" he said, his beady eyes shining.

Banks stared at the broken spacer in his hand. "I will have the boys at the lab run a test on this, to make it legal," he said to no one in particular. He put the piece away in his pocket and strode over to Randall.

"Mister Randall," he said quietly but officially, "you will have to come with me. I am placing you under arrest for the murder of one William Tate and for the possession of narcotic inside an Indian reservation!"

This time Randall did not object when Banks advised him of his rights.

When Banks finished, he produced a set of handcuffs and put them on his prisoner. He turned to Lance. "I think this wraps it up, Lance," he told him.

Lance nodded. "I'll take care of any loose ends," he said. He nodded to Captain Baca. "You and your men will stand guard over the body until I get back to my office and call an ambulance from there!"

Captain Baca nodded and walked outside. When the door had closed behind him, Banks turned to Eaglehawk. There was an inquisitive gleam in his eyes. "How did you know those spacers were made of solidified hashish?" he asked.

Lance grinned. "Simple," he said. "I am allergic to the damn stuff!"

The two friends grinned at one another. Banks finally shook his head and turned to his prisoner.

"Let's go!" he ordered.

The Duel

by
JACK
FOXX

A girl too evil to live. . .a man too good to die. . .a dawn which only one might see. . .

TANYA RUSSELL and I were present in Allan Pritchard's lavish penthouse apartment when Torrey slapped him with a pearl gray glove and challenged him to a duel.

Pritchard put a hand up to his well-tanned cheek and looked astonished. "You can't be serious," he said.

"I've never been more serious in my life," Torrey told him. He was a small, dandified man, wearing a suit of the same color as his gloves and carrying, of all things, a malacca walking stick. He had an affected British accent that tended to get on your nerves after awhile.

"You have blatantly stolen my woman, Pritchard, and my honor is deeply offended. I demand satisfaction."

"I was never your woman," Tanya snapped. She had long sable hair and dark eyes that gave her a distinct Latin appearance. She was, however, a White Russian, or so she told everyone.

"Of course you were," Torrey said. "But that is neither here nor there at the moment." He

looked at Pritchard. "Do you accept my challenge?"

"Dueling is illegal in the United States," I said.

"I am well aware of that fact," Torrey answered. "However, I do not intend to withdraw my challenge. Well, Pritchard?"

"This is ridiculous," Tanya said. "Why don't you just throw him out, Allan? After all, he practically forced his way in here, and this *is* private property."

Torrey paid no attention to her. His bright hazel eyes were fixed on Pritchard's face. "Well?" he said again. "Are you an honorable man or a sniveling coward?"

A dark flush came out of the collar of Pritchard's expensive smoking jacket.

Torrey had touched a raw nerve. Pritchard was not over-endowed with intelligence, despite a reputation as an international jet-setter, professional seducer, and ruthless business tyrant—he had inherited a couple of steel mills in the east, and ran them like prison camps—but his bravery was supposed to be legend. He had raced cars in Monte Carlo, climbed mountains in Tibet, and sailed yachts on six of the seven seas.

Nevertheless, I was of the opinion that he was basically unsure of himself and his rugged masculinity, that he needed to prove his courage to himself time after time.

He thrust his chin forward—a noble, deeply cleft chin that went well with the rest of his Nordic, blond-and-bronzed features.

"All right, little man," he said. "I accept your damned challenge."

"Allan," I said, "I think you're being a little hasty."

"Nobody calls me a coward," Pritchard said darkly. "That deeply offends my honor."

Tanya was exasperated. "For heaven's sake, Allan, you can't fight a duel in this day and age."

"If that's what this silly little ex-boyfriend of yours wants, then I'm more than willing to oblige. I'll take great pleasure in shooting one of his pointed little ears off."

"You choose pistols as the weapons, then?" Torrey said.

"Any objections?"

"None at all."

"I've got a set of antique dueling pistols," Pritchard said. "We'll use those."

"Excellent."

"Name the time and place."

"Tomorrow at dawn."

"Fine. Where?"

"Eucalyptus Park."

"Where in Eucalyptus Park?"

"The meadow at the north end, by the lake."

"That's okay by me."

"We need someone to act as a

second," Torrey said. He looked at me. "Keenan?"

"No," I said. "I want no part of this nonsense."

"Tanya?"

"Don't be absurd!"

"We don't need a second," Pritchard said.

"Of course we do."

"Why?"

"It is traditional."

"I never heard of anything so silly in my life," Tanya said. "Two grown men plotting a duel. It's—it's a farce, that's what it is!"

"Tanya is right," I put in. I glared at Torrey. "Isn't this carrying your phony British masquerade just a little too damned far?"

He glared back at me. "You," he said, "are next."

"What?"

"After I dispose of Pritchard, I shall duel with *you*."

"The hell you will," Pritchard said. "You won't be in a position to duel with anyone after tomorrow morning."

Torrey smiled thinly. "That remains to be seen."

Tanya Russell said, "You're a raving maniac, Philip Torrey. You ought to be locked up. And you seemed like such a gentle, cultured person when I met you. If I'd known the way you really are, I never would have gone out with you."

"Lovely sentiments from the woman who agreed to become my wife."

"Your wife? How dare you—"

"Do you deny it?"

"Of course I deny it!"

"It was a week before you deserted me in Armando's for Pritchard, don't you remember?" Torrey said. "We were in bed in my apartment, and you—"

"You'd better get out of here for now, Torrey," Pritchard said ominously. He took a step forward, his fingers balled into a fist. "Before I throw you out with a broken neck."

Torrey smiled, and executed a small bow. He crossed to the door, turned, and looked back at Pritchard. "Until tomorrow at dawn, then. Assuming, of course, that you don't undergo a change of heart."

"I'll be there, don't worry about that."

Torrey bowed again and slipped quietly into the hall outside, closing the door behind him.

Tanya said, "Allan, you shouldn't let him upset you like that."

"I don't like him or anything about him," Pritchard told her. "I'm looking forward to tomorrow morning."

"You can't really intend to go through with this idiocy."

"Of course I intend to go through with it." Pritchard was

stubborn-jawed. "I never go back on my word."

"But you might be killed!"

"I can take care of myself in any situation."

"Look, Allan," I said, "we've only been friends for three months and I have no real right to advise you. But you're not looking at this thing from a practical viewpoint. Suppose you kill Torrey? That would be premeditated murder, under the law. You'd go to jail for the rest of your life."

"Oh, I won't kill him. I'll shoot one of his damned ears off for him, just like I said I would. I'm an expert shot, in case you don't know."

"Well, I still don't like the idea of it," I said. "Too many things could go wrong."

"Dave is right," Tanya said. "Please don't go through with it, Allan."

Pritchard sat down on the divan facing the huge fireplace along one wall, and picked up the drink he had been sipping before Torrey's arrival. His eyes were bright. His manhood had been challenged, and the prospect of fighting an old-fashioned duel of honor set well with his spirit of romance and danger. Besides, he was certain of his superiority over a man such as Torrey. There would be no changing his mind now, I knew.

He said, "Stop worrying, both of you. Everything is going to be okay."

Tanya sighed, gave me one of those what-can-you-do looks, and sat down next to him on the couch. I went to the bar across the room and poured myself a Scotch and carried it over to the fireplace. I stared at the cold ashes in the hearth for a time, and then I turned and looked at Pritchard.

"Allan," I said slowly, "maybe I'd better go with you in the morning."

"Dave!" Tanya said, shocked. "Not you too!"

"I don't care for the idea of the two of them out there alone," I said to her. "I don't trust Torrey, not one little bit. There's no telling what he might do if no one else is around."

Pritchard was pleased. "That's the boy, Dave. You can act as second."

"All right."

"Do you want to see my set of dueling pistols?" he asked. "I bought them in Germany about three years ago."

"I'd like to, yes," I said. "Do you have ammunition for them?"

"Sure."

He left the room and returned minutes later with a large wooden case inlaid with intricate scrollwork. I opened the lid and looked inside. The pistols, gleaming, ornately etched silver,

lay side by side on a cushion of black velvet. A tiny silver box rested between them, and when I picked it up and opened it, I saw that there were several hand cast cartridges inside.

Pritchard said, "Beautiful, aren't they?"

"If you like guns," I answered. I closed the silver box, replaced it, and then closed the case. I handed it back to him. "I guess I'd better be going now. If we're to be in Eucalyptus Park by dawn, we'll have to be up by four o'clock. And you, especially, are going to need plenty of sleep."

"Yeah, you're right," Pritchard said. "I'll pick you up at four-thirty at your apartment."

"Okay," I said.

When I left, Tanya was still pleading with him to forget the whole insane business.

Eucalyptus Park, in the cold, gray-black minutes just before dawn, was as still and as empty as a graveyard. Torrey was already there when Pritchard and I arrived, wearing a dark blue blazer and cuffed trousers and a flowered ascot. He was pacing about the meadow like an athlete taking warm-up exercises.

"Well, well," he said when he saw us. "I half expected you not to show up, Pritchard. You possess more honor than I might have suspected and more courage."

Pritchard's smile was cold and thin, and he said nothing.

I hunched my shoulders inside my overcoat and blew on my hands to warm them. "All right," I said then. "Let's get on with this nonsense."

"And I see you persuaded Keenan to come along," Torrey said, looking at me. "Is he to act as second?"

"He is," Pritchard answered. He produced the case of pistols from under his arm and handed it to me.

I opened the case and shoved it under Torrey's nose. "Do these meet with your approval?"

"Quite," Torrey said. "Are they loaded?"

"Not yet."

"Suppose you assume that task."

I opened the silver box, and then loaded each of the two pistols. I extended the case.

"Choose your weapon," I said, and the words sounded vaguely foolish in my ears.

Each of them took a pistol. Torrey said, "We'll stand back to back in the accepted manner. Then Keenan will count to ten, very slowly, and we'll each take a step with each number. When ten is reached, we turn, aim our weapons, and fire. Agreed?"

"Agreed," Pritchard said.

"Shall we proceed, then?"

I backed off several paces. There was a thick dew on the meadow grass, and my feet felt wet and cold; a chill wind blew off the small lake nearby. I watched Torrey and Pritchard stand back to back, very erect, with the dueling pistols upraised in their right hands, muzzles pointing at the slowly lightening sky. Then I began to count.

I counted slowly, raising my voice above the wind, watching them move away from one another. On the final number they turned in unison and leveled the pistols, Torrey grinning carelessly, Pritchard looking grim and determined. They fired at exactly the same instant, so that the reports combined into one loud, reverberating sound that seemed to tremble the leaves on the surrounding eucalyptus.

A surprised look came over Torrey's face. The pistol slipped from his right hand, and his left came up to his chest. Thick crimson flowed out between his fingers. He seemed to sway for a long moment, and then he toppled forward into the wet grass and lay without moving.

I ran to him and knelt down and put my head close to his chest. Then I caught up one of his arms and felt for a pulse. Pritchard, staring stupidly at first, found mobility and came running up just as I straighted again. His face was ashen.

"He's dead," I said.

"My God!" Pritchard said. "But I—I aimed for the side of his head. He was standing so still—"

"You're not so good a shot as you thought you were, Allan," I said grimly. "You put a bullet right through his heart."

"I didn't mean to kill him. Dave, listen! I didn't mean to kill him!"

"What you meant to do and what you did are two entirely different things," I said. "You just fought a duel, and you just killed a man, Allan. Like I told you last night, that constitutes premeditated murder. If the police find out what happened here this morning, you could go to jail for life."

"What am I going to do?" Pritchard said. "I don't want to go to prison. I couldn't stand to be locked up. And the scandal—it would ruin me, even if I could buy an acquittal. I've done a lot of wild things in my life, but I've never been in any kind of real trouble."

"We can't report this, then," I told him. "We can't tell anybody what happened here this morning. Not even Tanya. You can make up some story about frightening Torrey so badly that he left town. She'll believe that. After a week or so, just to be on the safe side, you'd better drop her, if you hadn't already planned on doing so."

He nodded convulsively; the true stuff of which Allan Pritchard was made now clearly shown through the bluff and handsome exterior. "What—what about the body?"

"You leave that part to me."

"You'll help me? You'll stick your neck out for me?"

"What are friends for?"

"Dave, I don't know what to say."

"Never mind that," I said gruffly. "Now you get out of her and go back to your place and stay there until you hear from me. And remember, if Tanya asks, you scared Torrey into leaving town."

"But what about Torrey's car? All his belongings?"

"I'll get rid of them somehow," I said. "The only thing is, Allan—"

"Yes, yes?"

"It may cost you some money. A hell of a lot of money, if I have to bribe people here and there; murder's not a simple thing to cover up. I'm almost broke because of that stock collapse I told you about, or I wouldn't even mention it—"

"I don't care about money, Dave. Do what you can, at any price."

I nodded and gripped his shoulder. "Now don't worry. Everything will work out just fine."

"Thanks, Dave. Thanks."

I went with him to his car, and watched while he drove away slowly and shakily. When he was out of sight, I walked back to the meadow and stood looking down at Torrey.

And then I said, "You can get up now. He's gone."

Torrey stirred and gained his feet, grinning. "I heard most of it" he said. He had dropped that damned British accent, thankfully. "Pritchard is plenty shaken up. I think it's going to work, Dave."

"Was there ever any doubt?"

Torrey pulled up a handful of wet grass and wiped the chicken blood from his hands. A piece of the balloon, which had contained the blood and which he had

broken against his chest when he'd clapped his hand there, was caught in one of the buttonholes of his blazer; he plucked it away.

"How much do you think we can get out of him?" he asked.

"Twenty thousand at least," I answered. I picked up the dueling pistol he had dropped, and the one dropped by Pritchard, and removed the spent cartridges—the spent blank cartridges, which I had fashioned from the two I had palmed from the silver box the night before and which I had then inserted into the pistols in place of live ones this morning.

Torrey said, "That's only about sixty-seven hundred apiece, counting Tanya's share."

I replaced the dueling pistols in their case.

"Which still isn't bad money for three months of not so difficult play-acting," I reminded him. "The three of us should be able to work this dueling con again, now that we've got it down pat. It's a nice twist on an old gimmick."

"Yeah," Torrey said happily. "The world is full of suckers like Pritchard, isn't it?"

"If it wasn't," I said, "people like you and me and Tanya would starve to death."

I began to whistle a few bars of a very old tune as we started to where Torrey had left his car. *The Rogue's March*, appropriately enough.

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WITH DISHONORABLE INTENT

The kid had it all — looks, talent, a golden future. Only one thing was in the way — a little thing called Murder. . .

by JERRY JACOBSON

WHEN THE phone rang, Newlin was dozing on the cot in his office, conjuring himself a quiet night where only dreams invaded his sleep. Some feeling he got about the ring made the hairs move on his neck.

The caller was Amanda Arbuckle, manager of the Tropics Park Motel, Iron City's plushest motor inn, set out on the rim of two three miles north. She was calling about the guest in Unit-36, shot to death three minutes earlier. The pistol's explosion had awakened another guest in another unit, a salesman named Herbert Boyle from Akron, Ohio. Boyle was the only guest who had not judged the shot a backfire from a hotrodder's kicked-up sports car, the only one who had not rolled over and gone back to sleep.

When Boyle found the door to Unit-36 thrown wide, he investigated, cautiously. He found the dead occupant slung across a bed and quickly sought out Amanda Arbuckle.

Sheriff Newlin told her he'd be right over, chased the sleep from his eyes with a few splashes of cold water and then decided

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to get ahold of Rufus Downing. Downing had been Newlin's predecessor.

Newlin had been on the job two months, and an Iron City resident a little more than three. Many of Iron City's 32,000 population were still unaware a change had taken place, especially since Rufus Downing's curiosity and zeal rarely kept him from involving himself in police matters. Homicide had a way of creating a small network of people who could be potentially involved. Having Downing along could fill him in on townspeople Newlin did not know, and to smooth the way, would be invaluable.

Rufus Downing was still up, watching a late movie on television.

"Dead man," he said to Newlin over the phone. "Anybody identify him?"

Newlin said he didn't think to ask. But then, the body wasn't going anywhere.

Fifteen minutes later, Sheriff Newlin was speeding them along through a drizzly rain toward the Tropics Park Motel on Rustic Road. Rufus Downing was laboriously chewing on a hunk of cigar, with the remainder poised in his hand like a child's lollipop.

"Ran out of chewing tobacco." Downing was a big and powerfully built sixty-three years of age. Newlin had heard he had been the best semi-pro baseball player the state of Pennsylvania had ever turned out. His athletic history showed a couple of years with the Pittsburgh Pirates.

"Care for a chew, Sheriff?"

Newlin declined.

"You played ball in college and you never chewed?"

"Bubblegum," Newlin said. "I used to blow one between each pitch, just to shake up the batters."

"Stuff's bad for the teeth, gum is. You listen to any of the basketball game tonight?"

Iron City had hosted the finals of the state's high school basketball tournament, won by the Iron City Tigers. Newlin had assigned four extra officers to crowd and traffic control. He hadn't seen the inside of his apartment in three days.

"Parts of it," Newlin said. "Off and on."

"Be a long time before that Coulterville bunch thinks about pulling on their shoes in Iron City again."

"How did the Evans kid do?" Lonny Evans was Iron City's three-year All-State forward and very possibly the most sought-after high school senior in the state.

"He went out big," said Rufus Downing. "Thirty-nine points."

"Kid seems to have it all."

"And a ticket to the pros in his hip pocket. If he goes to a

college where they allow freshman on the varsity, he'll be a four-year All America."

It was all amiable small-talk. There was no sense in speculating on the dead man until they got to the Tropics Park. But Newlin knew they were both deeply wondering who he was.

"Tell me about Amanda Arbuckle." Newlin had not yet met her.

"Widow woman," said Rufus Downing. "Husband was killed in a big pit-mine cave-in here about six years ago. They strip mine now. Coal, iron, manganese. After it happened, the miners wildcatted until the State Legislature pushed through a bill outlawing pit operations. Pussyfooting old duffers. Their lolligagging cost the lives of fifteen good men. Amanda didn't remarry. Hired on at the Tropics about three years ago, to help put her two boys through college. One's a junior, the other's a senior, at Seton Hall."

"Must be tough on her having to put two sons through college without a father," Newlin said.

"Why don't you ask me a tougher question?" said Rufus Downing.

TWO MINUTES later they were meeting Amanda Arbuckle in her motel office. She was a sparse woman whose eyes still sparkled, even though the robe and hair net indicated she had been asleep when the killing took place.

"I closed the door to Unit-36," she told Newlin after Downing made introductions. "It's the last unit on the second floor. I've left the key under the mat."

The body was dressed in a trim business suit, indicating to Newlin he had not been in his unit long before his death. He was lying on his face on the unit's double bed. Beneath a lightly stubbled chin blood still seeped slowly from a small-caliber bullethole.

Newlin guessed the man had been dead less than an hour. He rolled the body over and asked Rufus Downing to take a look at the middle-aged face.

"Don't recognize him, Newlin. Total stranger."

"Well, someone knew him."

Rufus Downing shook his

head. "You don't have to know someone to rob him."

"If it was robbery."

Newlin used the unit's phone to call for the coroner's ambulance and then began to go through the man's pockets, collecting everything his fingers touched.

He said to Downing: "Ring, wallet, cigaret lighter. You still ruling robbery, Rufus?"

"Could have wanted cash. Any money in his wallet?"

Newlin made a quick count of the moderately thick slab of bills. "About three hundred dollars."

"Strike one motive, then. Anything else?"

Sheriff Newlin threw the items on the bed next to the body as he ticked them off. "Pocket nail clipper, loose change, unmonogrammed handkerchief, papers in his inside suit pocket, and a green ticket stub."

Rufus Downing examined the latter.

"Ticket to the high school tournament tonight. Could have been a relative of one of the players, or a fan who came up with the Coulterville bunch."

"He was neither," Newlin said, finishing with the dead man's wallet. "His driver's license states he was one Colin Gorst, from Pinewood-Lowell in western New York State. Another card states he was a member of the Alumni Association of C.W. Nathan College. And a third pinpoints him as a member of the althetic department."

Rufus Downing again examined the ring and lighter, both imbossed with initials and a crest. "That explains the initials on his ring and lighter. C.W.N.C."

"But no keys."

"His killer could have cabbed or walked here. Or taken a city bus to the outskirts of town. If he was a local resident, he probably didn't want his own car seen anywhere near the crime. After killing Gorst he drove off in the dead man's car."

"If he had one."

Newlin told Downing to phone Amanda Arbuckle and confirm or deny that supposition. While Downing phoned, Newlin checked the batch of papers found in the dead man's suitcoat. They were mimeographed forms, the kind college basketball scouts used to evaluate player-performance.

"Gorst did indeed have a car," said Rufus Downing, a minute later. "1971 late-blue sedan, New York license plate JYF-661. Anything in the papers?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary," Sheriff Newlin said. "Just scouting report forms on a handful of the players in the tournament." But there was something out of the ordinary in

them. Newlin couldn't put a finger on it until Rufus Downing said, curiously:

"I'd sure like to take a peek at this Gorst's evaluation of Lonny Evans."

Then it hit home. "There isn't a form for Evans," Newlin said, as he riffed through them a second time to make sure.

"That might not be too unusual," Rufus Downing said. "A kid like Lonny Evans, with his exceptional ability—well, filling out an evaluation form on him would be a waste of time. Like this Alcindor kid when he was in high school. I'm sure all a college scout wanted on him was his signature on a letter of intent."

"Well, let's not rule out the possibility that Gorst's killer might have taken Evans' data with him."

"For what reason?"

"That, Rufus," Sheriff Newlin said, "comes directly under the category of rolling up your sleeves and digging."

But Rufus Downing's drooping eyelids conveyed a lack of enthusiasm for that idea. He yawned widely. "If you don't mind, Sheriff," he said, "I think I'll pass on all that digging business until morning."

"If you're begging for a ride, I'm afraid I'll be here a while longer."

"I'll catch a lift with the coroner's ambulance and check in with you in the morning." One of the sleep-infested eyes gave a wink. "You ought to have this fella all captured and locked in the slammer by then."

Ten minutes later the ambulance came to collect its two passengers, leaving Newlin alone in Unit-36, wondering more than ever now who would want to kill a small college basketball scout no one had ever heard of.

Colin Gorst's last resting place before his grave revealed very little in the way of clues. His two-suiter suitcase held nothing but clothing. In the bathroom, Newlin found Gorst's toilet articles still arranged for continued use in a small medicine cabinet.

Back in the unit's living room, Sheriff Newlin found an attache case on the floor next to a nightstand. An examination of its contents revealed an assortment of dog-earred basketball programs, a graphic representation of Colin Gorst's travels as he followed the high school tournament trail down through four eastern states. Names of prominent performers were circled and annotated, the cryptic abbreviations known only to a dead man. Also in the attache were sets of the same scouting forms Newlin had found in Gorst's suit pocket, one set blank, the other filled

with the data of potential college performers.

None of it seemed to want to pertain to Colin Gorst and his death in Iron City. Then, Newlin stumbled on the letter in the accordian file of the attache. It was written on college stationary, from C.W. Nathan's director of athletics and addressed to Gorst at a hotel in Elizabeth, New Jersey.

The letter was little more than a set of instructions for Gorst on how to proceed with his job. But a lengthy paragraph on the second page caught Newlin's eye:

Regarding Lonny Evans of Iron City High, it is advised you make every attempt to remain within the scholarship guidelines for the 1971-72 academic year. If Evans' record reflects him to be above the 85th Percentile in chemistry and mathematics, the $250-per-quarter maximum is authorized. Our excellence in these fields should be stressed. If Lonny Evans is thinking along the lines of a career in professional basketball, then it is likely he will attend one of the larger Eastern universities where basketball is stressed. It should be kept constantly in mind that C.W. Nathan seeks student-athletes, with strong emphasis on the former. . .

Since the letter mentioned no other Iron City High player by name, it appeared to Newlin that Colin Gorst's visit to Iron City had been solely for the purpose of sounding out Lonny Evans' college plans. The issue was complicated, in view of the fact that Lonny Evans was not only a prime-cut of basketball talent, but an outstanding scholar as well. Colin Gorst wouldn't waste an out-of-the-way side trip to a small mining town to talk with a set of good hands and fast legs with no head on those bruising shoulders. But he had, and someone wasn't at all pleased by his sudden appearance.

For the time being there was little else Newlin could do in Unit-36. He had already noted that Gorst's suitcoat had been bunched and that there were several small bruises on his forearms, which indicated he had struggled with his assailant before he died. And that the pistol shot had been fired from close-range, perhaps just a matter of inches, owing to the telltale burns on Gorst's neck.

A chair was upturned and some of Gorst's clothing was scattered around the bed: a dress shirt, a necktie, two bath towels and a pair of kahki-tan socks. Newlin collected these, plus the rest of Gorst's belongings and packed them into his suitcase, then made a second sweep of his room to make sure everything had been collected.

He still had to alert his night

patrol units to be on the look-out for Gorst's sedan in the vicinity of Kangley Street, which ran behind the Tropics Park Motel, very possibly moving in a southerly direction back toward town. In the room and around the motel, Gorst's killer could have left a hundred small calling cards, but the darkness and Newlin's dog-tiredness told him he would have to put all that off until morning.

SATURDAY dawned to show a clear, cloudless sky. Back in his office, Sheriff Newlin relieved a weary Sergeant Benedetti, who had been called in from patrol duty at midnight when Newlin and Rufus Downing had hurried out to the Tropics Park Motel. He informed Newlin that Colin Gorst's car had not yet turned up, then went across Granite Avenue to the Bib 'N Tucker Restaurant to have his own breakfast and bring Newlin back a sweet roll and a pot of fresh coffee.

In the excitement of the previous evening, Newlin had forgot to yank the plug on their own thirty-cupper. He did that now but couldn't bring up enough nerve to look inside.

He first contacted C.W. Nathan College by telephone. Colin Gorst's authenticity as a basketball scout for the college was confirmed.

After a wolfed-down breakfast, Sheriff Newlin returned to The Tropics Park Motel. He found the office unit vacant. While he waited for Amanda Arbuckle's return he checked a batch of registration cards in a four-drawer index-card file. He found Colin Gorst's card, but it revealed nothing that would help him. Gorst had checked into the motel at six p.m. on Thursday evening. As innocuous as this card was, Newlin as he flipped through the batch of one hundred odd cards sensed an inconsistency in them, an omission glaring so brightly it had him blinded. He riffed through them twice more and then once again. And then the omission became apparent.

In the two-inch-thick brick of registration cards, not one indicated Unit-18 had ever been occupied. He jerked another handful from the second draw, dated six months earlier. He checked them with greater care than he had the first batch, but the results were the same. There were registrations for all other thirty-five units. But none for Unit-18.

It was not a related thought but it now struck Newlin suddenly that Rufus Downing had not turned up all morning. For a man who the previous night had leapt up from a good movie to get into Colin Gorst's

murder with both hands, his curiosity had now curiously waned. It was another little something for Newlin to puzzle over.

Sheriff Newlin had no time for extra contemplation, because Amanda Arbuckle had come into the office. Hurriedly she put down an armload of sheets and pillow cases and put out her hand. From her bedraggled appearance and reddened eyes, Newlin could tell she had passed a restless night.

"Your coming back this morning must mean you haven't caught him yet, Sheriff. The killer, I mean."

"No, we haven't, but we're getting closer," Newlin said. "I came back for a more thorough look at the grounds and the dead man's unit."

"Did you talk with this Mr. Boyle?" asked Amanda Arbuckle. "The salesman who heard the shot?"

Sheriff Newlin nodded. He'd had a brief chat with him the previous evening before he left. Boyle had seen nothing, not even a car leaving the motel on Kangley Road, though he'd heard one spinning its wheels and throwing gravel in that direction as he had walked out from his own unit to investigate the pistol shot.

A minute of silence passed. Then Newlin asked, "Mrs. Arbuckle, what can you tell me about the Evans' family?"

If the question seemed out of context to what had happened at the motel, Amanda Arbuckle gave no indication she thought so.

"Not very much, I'm afraid. I know there's only the two of them, Philip Evans and his son Lonny. Philip Evans is a maintenance man for Mortensen Metals, the firm operating our two strip mines. Philip Evans lost the fingers of his left hand in the cave-in that killed my husband."

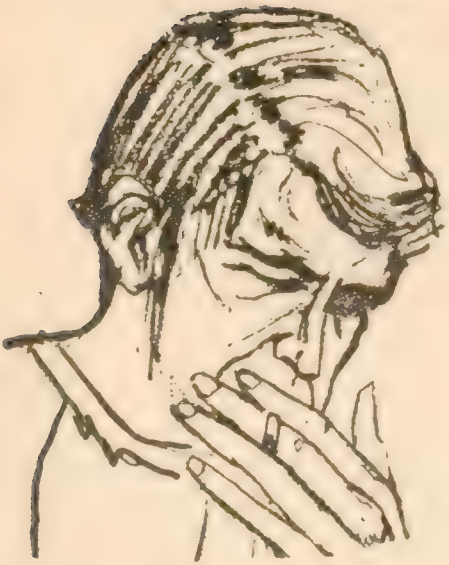
Suddenly her placid, slightly tired face showed a hint of cruelty. "If Mortensen Metals hadn't been forced into strip mining, Philip Evans would still be using a jackhammer, or picking or loading ore. But they were forced, and—well, a man with only one hand isn't much at operating a dozer, or any of the other machinery used to strip mine."

"And Philip Evans' wife?" Newlin asked.

"She died in an automobile accident the next year. I admire Philip Evans for not falling into bitterness over all of these setbacks. He's a strong man, Sheriff Newlin. And, of course, he has his son."

"Yes. Lonny."

"The best basketball player in the state and an excellent student," said Amanda Arbuckle,



with strange pride. "And president of his senior class."

"Colin Gorst, the dead man, was in Iron City to scout Lonny Evans," Sheriff Newlin told her. "For a possible college basketball scholarship."

"Yes. He entered the name of a college on his registration card." The hazel eyes turned murky. "Why would anyone want to kill a basketball scout? I should think a town with a product like Lonny Evans would roll out the red carpet."

"Only someone in Iron City wanted Gorst swept under that carpet," Newlin said. "You wouldn't know why, would you, Amanda?"

"Me? I've no idea at all, Sheriff."

Newlin's mind was drawn back to the registration cards.

"While you were out, Amanda," he said, "I went through some of your registration cards and I found something very curious."

"Curious?"

"No one has ever stayed in Unit-18."

Amanda Arbuckle did not appear to be thrown by this abrupt challenge either.

"With good reason, Sheriff," she said quite evenly. "I keep it vacant for relatives and close friends when they drop by to visit Iron City. And the relatives of friends. I don't bother to make out a registration card and let them stay for free."

"You wouldn't mind if I checked Unit-18 for myself, would you?"

Amanda Arbuckle threw him a look of boredom. "Be my guest, Sheriff," she said and presented Newlin the key before he had even asked.

Before checking the interior of Unit-18, Newlin first went over the area behind the motel, Kangley Street. All he found were two deep ruts in gravel and hard pan where Gorst's killer had sped away the night before.

Likewise he found nothing more in Unit-36 and nothing on the walkway and concrete stairwell leading to Kangley Street. He had hoped a cuff link

might turn up, a thin trail of gasoline from a leaky gas tank which would take him down Kangley and straight to the killer's front door.

Unit-18 was his last fading hope, but if Newlin entertained thoughts that the room had any connection with the death of Colin Gorst, he was once again disappointed. It was a spotless set of rooms, all readied for occupancy but showing no signs it had ever been used. The bureau contained a Gideon Bible, stationary, picture postcards of the motel and a cheap, ballpoint pen.

The last item of furniture Newlin checked before he left was a single-drawer nightstand next to the bed. Expecting the same deflating results, he drew it open with slow reluctance. Inside was what looked to be an ordinary piece of black cloth, something which might have been a cleaning rag left behind by Amanda Arbuckle or possibly an absent-minded cleaning woman.

But a closer inspection told Newlin it was not. Vaguely, the item fought to relate itself to something Sheriff Newlin had observed quite recently. Up, up it squirmed toward his consciousness, only then to slide away. He slipped the item into his hip pocket. Its relatedness couldn't be forced. He was certain it would show itself when it was ready.

From Amanda Arbuckle, Sheriff Newlin received the Evans address. He had never cared for the odds in chasing a hunch, but then he never cared for hunches piling up unresolved, either.

The Evans' place was a carbon copy of hundreds of other wood-framed structures in Iron City. Laid in neat, unexciting rows, they were pinched in by the two massive black hills of manganese and coal like tiny chips of wood being squeezed slowly to death in the jaws of a vice.

As Newlin started up a short flight of wood stairs, he heard at the rear of the house what sounded like the scrape and flap of tennis shoes on concrete. Intermittently there came the sound of the rubbery ping of a basketball being bounced.

He followed the narrow walkway around. A man was shooting baskets at a backboard and rim bolted above an open garage. For his age and disproportioned size, he moved over the court with amazing fluidity and grace. Only a critical observer of basketball would have noted that the man did not shoot or dribble with his left hand. It was a mere stump, gloved in a long, khaki-tan Army sock. The man's eye caught

Newlin's arrival and the bear-shaped, bronzed body stopped playing.

"Mr. Philip Evans? I'm Sheriff Newlin."

The man's reddened face showed disconcertedness for only a second. The grip Newlin accepted was firm. It seemed to him that Philip Evans was making a valiant attempt to turn a simple gesture of greeting into a contest of strength.

"What brings you out here on such a ripping fine Saturday morning? You ought to be over at the supermarket, checking out them hippies, ripping off the A & P, as they say."

"No need," Newlin said, lightly. "Grothe's put in a couple of peep slits over there. I'm afraid the hippies ripping days will soon be nothing but a vicarious memory."

Philip Evans went back to his solitary game. "Great game, basketball. Those kids could learn a thing or two about life and rules with basketball. No, they'd rather rip off the merchants, and jam needles in their arms and play with flowers and beads in Memorial Park. Got their heads screwed on backwards, some of these kids today."

"Most of them will get them turned around straight," Newlin said. "Give them time."

"And then they find out they've run out of time. My kid, Lonny, now there's a kid with his head on straight. There's a kid with plenty of time and a kid who fills it with the right things."

"Basketball, you mean."

Philip Evans stopped playing for a brief smile. On the front of a sweatshirt stencilled IRON CITY HIGH, a circle of perspiration was spreading.

"Yeah, the kid's going to be a great one. Got it all—size, height and a natural instinct for the game. Two out of three don't get you any farther up the street than four years at Rah Rah University. Once in a generation one comes along like that kid. You can count them on the fingers of one hand. Chamberlain. . .Cousy. . .Russell. . .Baylor. . .Alcindor."

There was another smile but in this one Newlin read a trace of self-pity. "Good thing greatest ain't commonplace. As you can see, I don't happen to have enough fingers to go around just now."

Newlin read the remark as an attempt by Evans to elicit compassion. He let the comment pass without biting.

"Is your son home now, Mr. Evans?"

"Down at the high school gym playing a few pick-up games. He's there all day."

"After something as exhaust-

ing as a state tournament," Newlin said, "I'd think all he'd want to do is relax for a few days."

There was a mild look of condescension. "Sheriff, when your sights are set on being the best, you can't afford a luxury like that."

Sheriff Newlin nodded. He found his attention being distracted to Evans' deformed hand repeatedly.

"It's purely a matter of survival of the fittest, Sheriff," Philip Evans went on. "All around the country, right at this minute, thousands of kids are playing games of pick-up basketball. When it gets dark they'll play under some street light, or bounce and shoot by Braille. If it rains, they'll break into a gym or stick it out and catch a little pneumonia. It's a process of elimination, like anything else in this world. You mix it up and give it plenty of time and out comes the cream."

The word 'elimination' seemed to Newlin as good an opportunity as he'd likely get.

"Mr. Evans," he said, "do you know a man named Colin Gorst?"

Evans might have become winded, or it might have been the law of averages catching up with advancing age; but Philip Evans next ten-foot set shot missed and missed badly.

"Gorst, Gorst. . ."

"He was a basketball scout for a New York college. He was here in Iron City this weekend for the state tournament."

"You said was. He in another line of working now, or something?"

"He was murdered last night in his room at the Tropics Park Motel," Newlin said with swiftness calculated to be disarming. It was not.

"Gorst, you say. Was he short little guy? About forty? Tan business suit?"

"That was Colin Gorst."

"Yeah, well he was here at the house last night. A whole gang of them from the high school stopped in here after the game. You know, the players and their girls. A few parents. And Coach Tiffenbauer. About a quarter-to-eleven, I think it was."

"And Colin Gorst," Sheriff Newlin reminded Philip Evans.

"Look, Sheriff. He wasn't invited. And he wasn't the only scout there, either. There was also a guy from Seton Hall and one from Niagara University."

"Were they invited?"

"None of them was. Hell, I sent them all letters saying we'd narrowed the place where Lonny would go to school. Either U.C.L.A. or Princeton, I told 'em. Princeton's out to build a winner in '72 or '73 with this seven-footer named Walcik from

a high school in Buffalo. And U.C.L.A.—well, you know those Bruins."

"But you let them come to the victory celebration."

"Hell, it don't cost any skin to be polite to them, even if they are running out of the money."

PHILIP EVANS, either because he was finished playing or because he needed breathing room to organize his thoughts, invited Sheriff Newlin into the house.

After towelling off, Evans led the way into a living room sparsely furnished in ten-year-old odds and ends, a room completely absent of the frills and colors a woman's deft touch might have lent it. In fact, the only eye-catcher in the room at all was the wide mantle above a red brick fireplace. It was jammed with more trophies and cups than the front window of a shop dealing in them.

Evans called Sheriff Newlin's attention to a set of three trophies on a nondescript coffee table.

"The kid got those last night," Evans explained. "One for the state title, one for making the all-tournament team, and one for getting picked its most valuable player."

"Very impressive," Newlin commented. "But if you don't mind, Mr. Evans, I'd like to get back on the subject of Colin Gorst."

Refreshed, Philip Evans' confidence seemed restored. "Shoot away, Sheriff."

"What time did the victory celebration break up here last night?"

"Around eleven-thirty. The whole bunch was invited over to Coach Tiffenbauer's place in Glenwood. He's got a big, rambling place with a pool. They stopped off here first, because of Lonny. A few cold drinks and some snacks and some whooping it up. You don't snub your class president and M.V.P. because of what his old man does for a living."

"I imagine you talked with the scouts," Newlin said. "Or they talked with you."

"You don't pinch somebody's straw and put arsenic in his chip dip because he ain't invited. Sure, I talked with them."

"And did the subject of Lonny's selection of a college come up?"

"Once or twice. Hell, it's no secret why they came. Them guys were selling and they wanted to find out if anybody was in the market. But like I say, we got it narrowed down to Princeton and U.C.L.A."

Newlin nodded.

"Now, Sheriff, if you're sniffing around after the killer of this Gorst fellow, well, seems to

me you'd get better action over at the Brill place, or the Cason house."

"Why is that, Mr. Evans?" Newlin asked.

"Sheriff Newlin, Bubba Cason and Rich Brill aren't what you'd term the caliber of players likely to bring the Seton Halls and the Niagaras running with fistfuls of money. The big Eastern schools can pick up a dozen like them for a dime in their own backyard. And get change."

"That's interesting, Mr. Evans," Sheriff Newlin said. "But, unfortunately, the scout killed was Colin Gorst, of C.W. Nathan."

"Figure it out, Sheriff. If the Seton Halls and the Niagaras don't want you, then you switch gears to the C.W. Nathans. Only the C.W. Nathans don't give you sweat unless you got grades in the top ten percent of your class. Well, Bubba Cason and Rich Brill couldn't hike themselves into the top ten percent on a catapult."

"So enraged that C.W. Nathan isn't breaking its neck to get them into a uniform, one of them kills its scout," Newlin said.

"Now you're getting a feel for it," said Evans.

Philip Evans seemed to be purposely leading Newlin away from his intensions, purposely indicting others for no reason. It grated on Newlin's sensibilities enough to make him want to keep plodding.

"Mr. Evans, do you own a small-caliber pistol?"

"Hunting rifles in the basement. But no pistols." Philip Evans put his feet up on the edge of the coffee table. Between trophies, Newlin caught sight of another glimmer of hope.

"Your shoes," he said, in a casual tone. "They look new. Do you ever wear them for anything else besides sports?"

A chuckle seemed to mock Newlin's naivete. "Sheriff, an expensive pair of lo-cuts like these shouldn't touch anything but hardwood. Shouldn't even have been wearing them out there in the driveway just now."

Newlin pretended embarrassment. "No, I guess I am a bad judge of basketball shoes. Those aren't the kind of shoes you'd wear even for doing jobs around the house. Gardening, or lawn mowing, say."

"Not a chance."

"You see, the reason I bring the subject up, Mr. Evans, is that the sole of your right shoe seems to have picked up some debris. Dirt or manure it looks like. Had you not put your feet on the coffee table, I wouldn't have noticed."

Philip Evans, perspiring again, twisted the canvas and took a look. "Yes, well, I did walk across the lawn a couple of times

this morning. That's probably where I picked it up."

Sheriff Newlin took his handkerchief from his pocket and unfolded it. "You wouldn't mind if I scraped a bit of it into this, would you?"

Reluctantly, Philip Evans consented.

Newlin folded the handkerchief and replaced it back in his pocket carefully. Then, he exploded the charge that for five tense minutes had been under the anxiety of a long fuse.

"Mr. Evans, it wasn't you who killed Colin Gorst, was it?"

Philip Evans' long laugh hadn't worked. All through it was a tautness Newlin could almost grab and touch.

"Did you hold Gorst up here at the house last night, Mr. Evans? After the others had left for Coach Tiffenbauer's house? It won't be difficult checking to learn if Colin Gorst failed to show up there with the other birddogs."

Philip Evans maintained silence.

"Or perhaps you followed Gorst to his motel room at the Tropics Park? Or were waiting there for him when he arrived?"

Philip Evans' smile wasn't lingering long on his lips.

"You can do better than that, Newlin. How would I even know where this Gorst was staying? We've got a dozen motels in town. So I'm going to incriminate myself by calling them all on the telephone to inquire about a little nobody who isn't even worth a dime to me?"

"A friend in the right place could solve that dilemma for you."

"And who would that be?"

"Amanda Arbuckle, for instance?"

Evans' indignation lacked any conviction at all. It was as contrived as his humor had been the moment before.

Newlin took the piece of black cloth from his pocket then.

"Do you recognize this, Mr. Evans? It's a black khaki military sock, the kind worn under combat boots. I found it in a drawer in Unit-18 at the Tropics Park Motel, after discovering that the unit had never been occupied. Or was made to appear it had never been occupied. I'm wondering if a check through your clothing will turn up its mate? It could very well be the one covering your left hand right now."

Philip Evans unconsciously covered his deformed hand with his right. "It's a sock, like a million others in this world."

In Newlin's mind, another bit of the puzzle dropped into place. "Before you killed Gorst, you struggled with him. That was evident when I checked his room. Something significant hap-

pened during that struggle, didn't it Mr. Evans?"

The question was purely rhetorical, an answer incriminating.

"As you fought with Colin Gorst, before the pistol went off beneath his chin, the tan khaki sock you were wearing was torn from your left hand by Gorst. After you killed him, things happened too fast for you to think clearly. You knew you had to get out of that unit before any of the Tropics Park's other guests investigated the shot. You were dealing in split seconds. And split seconds have a way of allowing lots of room for error."

Newlin didn't have to tell Philip Evans he had both khaki socks in his possession. The certainty of that was written in fear all over Philip Evans' face.

"Colin Gorst," Newlin went on, "was a very important man to you, wasn't he, Evans?"

Evans' laughter again rang with falseness. "Gorst? He was nothing but a small time nobody from a jerkwater college nobody ever heard of."

"And that was precisely what made him important," said Sheriff Newlin. "He was on the verge of getting your son's name on a letter of intent to enroll at C.W. Nathan College."

"Lonny's too bright a kid to make a stupid decision like that."

"Or perhaps so bright he might make the very decision you feared."

Philip Evans rose uncomfortably and walked to the trophy-laden mantel. He leaned one arm on it, his mouth set in a defiant straight line.

"Think on it a moment, Evans. Instead of four years of sparkling collegiate success at Princeton or U.C.L.A., Lonny instead chooses C.W. Nathan, where test tubes and computers take precedence over the trap-zone and the double-post offense. After graduation, no million-dollar, no-cut contract with the Knicks or the Lakers—just a bottom-rung-of-the-ladder position with a computer firm or Dow Chemical, where even a young man 6'9" gets lost in the shuffle."

Philip Evans fingers were fidgetting with the black khaki sock like a cat's paw toying with a ball of twine.

When he spoke the words came out like strings of limp spaghetti. "It's your word against mine, Newlin. And in a close-knit town like Iron City, words don't count for as much as the person who's speaking them. I've lived here all my life. The painted name on your office door isn't even dry yet."

Newlin looked at the tormented face.

"Evans, we'll look for that

pistol and we'll find it. We'll search for forms missing from Colin Gorst's attache case and we'll find those, too. We'll look also for a missing letter of intent, if one exists and we'll find the mates to the khaki socks found in the two units of the Tropics Park. We'll find fingerprints and we'll find cloth fibers. And when we locate Colin Gorst's abandoned car, we'll go over it like an F.B.I. counterfeit agent checking for flaws in a funny dollar. We'll paint you into a corner so tightly, you'll be up on your toes."

Suddenly and unexpectedly, Philip Evans' good right hand went into a trophy cup on the mantel. It came out holding a small-caliber pistol.

Evans' eyes were glazed with tears as his hand pointed the pistol at Newlin's chest unsteadily. "I'd received answers from U.C.L.A.," he said. "They were going to give Lonny the moon and half of town. He'd be a starter in his sophomore year, with the firm promise that they'd keep him in every game during garbage-time, no matter how wide the point-spread. Job, car, apartment and workouts with the Lakers during the off-season. We had it made!"

"Amanda Arbuckle had nothing to do with Gorst's death, did she?" Newlin sensed.

"Nothing at all. I followed Gorst back to the motel after the party broke up here last night, watched him go into Unit-36. I parked my car a half mile towards town and then walked back to the motel. I tried to reason with him not to pursue Lonny, that U.C.L.A. already had him locked up and he was wasting his time."

"Was Lonny aware of your negotiation with U.C.L.A.?"

"No. I was still in the process of firming up the package, seeing to the details of the scholarship. This is a complicated thing. It can get pretty callous, pretty dirty."

"But not as dirty as murder," Sheriff Newlin said.

"It had to be done. The kid was too smart for his own good. He was selling himself down the river for a Phi Beta Kappa key and a grant-in-aid to study matrices and vectors in some dank, crummy mathematics hall until he falls off his chair from lack of sleep and fresh air and exercise.

"The years I devoted to that boy," Philip Evans went on, his voice choking. "All the basketball, all the discipline and hope. Some little creep from a college nobody knows or cares about was going to turn all my plans into a pile of rubble."

"Somebody cared about that nowhere college," Newlin said. "Your son cared about it, cared

about it enough to want to give up a lifetime of basketball."

"He has no conception of what's right for him!" Philip Evans' roared, his twisted face a madman's hideous mask. "What happens to me, Sheriff? Huh? What happens to my dreams, my plans? Can I move to New York or Los Angeles and live out my life with dignity and pride as I watch my son become the greatest professional basketball player of them all? No. What I can do is move to Boston or Cleveland and talk about my son the chemist—my son the mathematician, who nobody wants to hear about. That kid of mine, he's a millionaire. He has a bank account overflowing with dribbling and moves and baskets and philosophy. A little zero was going to bankrupt him, bankrupt me!"

"Bankrupt you?" Newlin said, angrily, fully aware the pistol was still trained on him. "It's your son's life we're talking about, not yours. What right have you to live it for him? A father's right? A father has no such rights. No one has the right to live another human being's life for him."

"It all has to count for something," Philip Evans was saying, very weakly. "Do you understand? All the planning has to have a conclusion, or it's wasted. Like my hand."

The anger and frustration showing in Evans' face was reaching a breaking point. Would he pressed on the pistol's trigger out of that frustration? Would his humiliation and rage send a bullet tearing into Newlin's chest?

"What are you planning to do now?" Newlin said carefully. "Kill me too, and run? With my car parked out in front of your house and half the neighborhood strolling by and noting it?"

"And my car parked in your driveway."

The third voice coming so abruptly and menacingly, Newlin's heart did a little dance on his chest. He turned in the direction from which it had come. Standing in the kitchen doorway was Rufus Downing with an ugly-looking shotgun aimed at Philip Evans.

"Get it over with, Evans," he said, "if that's what you've in mind to do. But I warn you. Pull that trigger and I'll make sure there isn't enough left of you to put in a paper sack."

Slowly, the pistol clutched in Evans' shaking hand lowered.

"Excuse my unforgiveable oversleeping," Rufus Downing said to Newlin. "Your fault, really. If you hadn't got me out running around town past my bedtime last night—"

"I didn't notice you com-

plaining any for an old, beat-up cop."

"Went back to the Tropics Park this morning to try and run you down. It didn't take much to get Amanda Arbuckle to tell me you might be headed for the Evans place."

"If Lonny had been just another ballplayer," Philip Evans said, "I could have lived with that." He was crying now. "But he was the best of the best. Poetry. Never saw a kid could play the game like Lonny. It was my way out, don't you see? This town, it hasn't long to live. Every day the dozers eat their way a little closer. In five years nobody will have any need of a one-handed maintenance man. It was my only way out."

"It?" said Sheriff Newlin as he took the pistol from Philip Evans. "You mean 'he', don't you? Is your son only a commodity to you? Has he ceased to be a human being?

"I'm mixed up," said Philip Evans honestly. "It's all so complicated, life is."

They allowed Philip Evans to go into his bedroom to change his clothes and Rufus Downing and Sheriff Newlin sat down on the couch to wait.

"I think Philip Evans and Amanda Arbuckle were deep into an affair," Newlin said to Downing. "We'll probably find a motel key for Unit-18 at the Tropics Park someplace in the house. If we look hard enough."

"Wouldn't serve any useful purpose to drag that out," said Rufus Downing, with sudden wisdom that surprised Newlin. "Phil Evans, regardless of what he's done, deserves a little compassion."

"You're right, of course," Sheriff Newlin admitted. He truly had no stomach for throwing more dirt on a man who was in it up to his neck.

"Where's the boy?" Rufus Downing asked.

"Down at the high school playing basketball," Newlin said. "You want to take a walk down there and tell him where his father will be?"

"I guess I'll have to."

They were quiet a moment. Then Sheriff Newlin said, "If I had the power to eliminate one trait from the human make-up, I think the one I'd eliminate would be fear."

"Fear's a powerful thing all right," said Rufus Downing. "Turns cowards into courageous people, for all the wrong reasons."

As they waited for Philip Evans to reappear, Sheriff Newlin called Rufus Downing's attention to the array of new trophies on the coffee table. Downing noted them briefly. Though neither man now had any real interest in trophies.

GREGORY

She was only a little lady, mated to a murderous devil. She hadn't a chance to live. She nodded. Only just one...

by P.A. BRISCO

I KNOW THAT they will be here for me in a few minutes. The words of an old song keep running through my mind. Something about men in white coats coming to take you away.

I wonder if the people from Shady Knolls will wear white coats, and arrive in an ambulance, like doctors. Perhaps not. Shady Knolls is very exclusive. They will probably be much more subtle than that.

I really don't mind going, you know. In a strange kind of way, I am even looking forward to it. It will be so quiet and peaceful. I hear that it is very beautiful, with spacious rooms, and well cared for grounds. It is very expensive, but then, I have a great deal of money. In fact, that is the reason this all started, really. Because I have so much money.

I suppose I should have been more wary when Harry began to pay serious attention to me, but as a plain, unaggressive maiden lady of forty-five years, I suppose I shared the desperation of most women in this position.

Of course my condition was made a bit more pleasurable by the fact that I had inherited several million dollars from my father, but I really didn't know how to enjoy money, not in the sense that the beautiful people know how to enjoy money. My pleasures were, and are, simple. I traveled a good deal, but even travel palls when one is always alone. As the years passed uneventfully by, I more and more desperately wanted some-

one to share things with. So I suppose, I wasn't as cautious as I might have been, when Harry appeared on the scene.

Harry was tall, ruddy cheeked, and handsome in a full-blooded, florid fashion. At first I couldn't believe that he was really interested in me. I know how plain and uninteresting I am, but somehow he made me believe that it was really me he cared about. He made me feel pretty, and interesting, and he did give me some pleasure and some tender moments that I might not otherwise have known. But then, the hurt was even greater, after I found out that his love was only a sham.

We hadn't been married for more than a month, when he began to let his veneer of charm and affection peel. I suppose the first sign of his real nature was the way he treated Gregory.

I purchased Gregory some months before I met Harry. I was downtown on one of my infrequent shopping trips, when I saw the new shop. It appeared to be some type of nursery, or flower shop, but it was unlike any other such shop I had ever seen. The windows were hung with bright posters, and there was the smell of incense and the sound of music in the air.

Attracted by the color and sound, I wandered inside. It was very pretty, in a bright, confusing way. Plants in gaily painted pots lined the shelves and hung from wires fastened in the ceiling. The pots were hand painted, and each one bore a name. I examined a Richard, a Sophia, a Millicent and an Edward.

The owner of the shop, a nice young man with a beard, came over to help me. I had already half decided to buy one of the plants, and after he explained the shop to me, I couldn't resist.

He told me of all the new studies on plant life. How plants have been found to respond to kind and loving thoughts, and how they react adversely to harmful thoughts, or pain. He even told me that plants respond more favorably to classical music than to rock music and how these things have been tested scientifically. That's why his plants all had names, and—he insisted—personalities.

I found the idea intriguing. I have never been a "pet person", but it seemed to me that a plant could be a kind of pet. Quiet, well behaved, and, if the young man was right, friendly and loving as well.

It took some time before the young man found the plant he thought suited me. It was a modest sized bush in a pale, green pot, with a name spelled out in dark green letters, *Gregory*. He had healthy looking shiny leaves, and was, all in all, a most debonair and handsome plant. The young man told me that he would do well on a patio or balcony, and I had just the place for him, the balcony outside my bedroom. The young man said that Gregory was a flowering bush, and gave me a small brochure, listing all his characteristics.

I took Gregory home, and from the beginning we had a most pleasant relationship. I watered him, gave him plant food, and thought loving thoughts at him. He responded by growing healthy, strong, and handsome, and, it seemed to me, grateful.

It wasn't long after Harry and I were married that he noticed Gregory. Harry had gone out to the balcony to have a smoke, he smoked cigars, and suddenly, I heard him laughing. He had a big, hearty laugh that sounded jolly at first. It wasn't until later that you noticed the undercurrent of meanness. I went out to see what had amused him so, and found him looking down at Gregory.

"Gregory!" he said loudly, between chuckles. "Gregory, for God's sake."

"Hush," I said before I thought. "You'll hurt his feelings."

I realized I had made a mistake as soon as I said it. At this time I still didn't know Harry for what he was, but I had lived with him long enough to perceive that he wasn't imaginative, and to know what he would think about anyone who said a plant had "feelings".

"Hurt his—you've got to be kidding. Come on now, Sarah."

So, I tried to explain, telling him what the young man at the shop had told me, but he brushed my words away. I even tried to show him the brochure, but he wouldn't look at it. He just kept laughing.

He continued to tease me about it all day. Jolly, you know, like it was an affectionate joke, but I felt uneasy. There was something in his eyes; a look I used to see in my cousins eyes when he was a boy. A look that said; *Aha! I've got something on you. Something I can torment you with.*

After that day he never let the joke rest. He could see that it upset me, and he was beginning to enjoy upsetting me more and more. When we had guests, he would bring up the subject, saying things like: "Old Sarah here, she's so sentimental that she even has a pet plant. Honest to God. A plant with a name. She treats it like a baby."

The guests, usually friends of Harry, would laugh, and I would feel my face turn hot. It was about that time that I began to realize that Harry had no love for me. No love at all. It was my money, my lovely green money that he wanted. But I had made a bargain, albeit a bad one. I had been taught that if you made your bed you must lie in it, and I tried to do so with as much dignity as Harry allowed me to keep.

As time passed, he took to more direct methods of tormenting both Gregory and me. I would find cigar ashes around Gregory's roots when I went to water him. Harry would sneak up behind me, pull on my hair, and whisper in my ear, "I thought mean thoughts at Gregory today. Do you think it will hurt his feelings?" Then he would laugh.

It was a mean laugh. The jolly sound had left it entirely.

Gregory was looking haggard. His leaves lost their shine and his branches drooped. And then, one morning I found little twigs and branches, ripped from Gregory's body, lying on the balcony beside his pot. He was bearing little buds now, and would soon be in flower. It was almost like mutilating an expectant mother. It was then I think, that I began to hate Harry; and not just for what he was doing to Gregory.

When Harry punished Gregory, he did so to hurt me. The fact that he wanted to hurt me, the fact of his pure meanness, filled me with a cold anger that I had never before known. It was then that I vowed I would get back at him. I didn't know how, but I believed I would think of a way.

Harry was open now about his feelings for me. Harry loved dinner parties. He was a hearty eater, and liked having his friends dine with him. It also seemed that he enjoyed having an audience in front of which to torment me. Most of his friends were coarse, insensitive people like Harry himself, but one of them puzzled me. He was a doctor, named Martin Prinz. I noticed him because Harry delivered a good many of his remarks to the doctor, and because the man spoke so seldom. He was a quiet man, with a peaceful face and busy eyes.

These dinners finally became so unbearable for me that I took to retiring from them earlier and earlier. They always followed a pattern. After dinner and drinks, quite a few drinks, Harry would remark about how "unusual" I was, how "strange". I mean, a woman who talked to a plant, by God. A woman who had a plant with a name. Then, when I asked to be excused, he would remark on how I disliked people. How I always wanted to be alone. Sometimes it was more than I felt I could bear.

Then, Gregory bloomed. One afternoon I went out on the balcony and there he was, covered with blossoms. He looked better than he had in weeks. For a few days I was almost happy again. But it was only a brief respite. Harry began to increase his cruel teasing, and in what seemed a very short time, Gregory's flowers, those that Harry had not plucked, faded and turned to small, pea-sized green fruit.

I knew that Gregory was ill. He looked shabby and pitiful. He was only a shadow of his former debonaire self. My nerves were stretched to twanging tautness, and I felt as if the slightest touch would snap them.

Gregory was all I really had.

My only friend, the only one who really needed me. As he faded, I felt myself fade also. But as Gregory and I grew weaker, Harry seemed to grow stronger. He positively swelled with pleasure.

And then, one afternoon, I overheard Harry and Dr. Prinz talking. I had just come down the stairs and was about to step into the library, when I heard their voices. Something prompted me to step behind the heavy drapes at the library door, where I could not be seen.

Dr. Prinz was speaking; his voice low, and thoughtful.

"I don't know, Harry. I agree that she is somewhat withdrawn, not a social person, but that doesn't constitute insanity, you know."

"Well, what about that plant—Gregory, as she calls it? Is that natural? My God! She carries on about it as if it were a human child."

I peered through a space between the curtains, and saw Dr. Prinz shrug his shoulders.

"A not unusual reaction in a childless woman, who, if you'll pardon my saying so, Harry, probably does not have a very happy marriage. You, know, when you called me in on this case, I had my reservations about approaching her like this, as a friend of yours, a guest.

"It's not exactly the best way to conduct an examination. I'll admit that it's possible that she is mentally ill, but without a proper examination and tests, I can't tell conclusively I certainly cannot help you commit her to an institution on the basis of what I have seen. I—"

I slipped out from behind the curtains and made my way unsteadily to my room. So that was it. That was what Harry was after. If I was committed, he would become executor of my estate. A sudden surge of strength, born of determination, filled me. I hurried out to the balcony, to Gregory. I would take Gregory away, perhaps back to the young man in the shop, out of Harry's reach. If Harry could not get to me through Gregory, I felt that I could deal with the situation.

It was there, on the balcony,

that the final shock awaited me. Gregory had been murdered. He lay upon his side, pitiful and small, his nest of roots naked and vulnerable, the shards of his pot scattered around him. His little branches were twisted and broken, where Harry had stamped on them—for it could only be Harry who had killed him. Hot eyed and tearless, I reached out a trembling hand and plucked a few of the small green fruit. I wanted to keep them to remember Gregory by.

After I cleaned up Gregory's remains, it was almost one-thirty. Since it was the cook's day off, I hurried down to the kitchen and began to prepare Harry's lunch. There were cold boiled potatoes in the refrigerator, and I prepared a very nice potato salad to go with the ham which cook had left. Right on the stroke of one-thirty, I brought Harry his lunch.

He watched me closely, scanning my face with narrowed eyes, as I put his food on the table, but I managed to keep my expression calm and serene. Then he smiled slyly.

"How's Gregory this morning?"

"I haven't been out to see him yet. I thought I would go right after lunch."

Harry's smile widened. The devil might smile like that.

Harry began to eat, quickly aggressively; as he did everything. I watched him until his plate was clean, and he sat back with a satisfied smile. I watched until his smile changed to a grimace, until his eyes grew wide with questions and filled with fear. I watched every spasm, listened to every gasp, and I felt no sorrow, except for Gregory, whom he had killed.

When it was over, I called Dr. Prinz; and now, they are coming to take me away. I will be a model patient, and perhaps someday, in the not too distant future, they will consider me "cured" and release me. In the meantime, I am content. Gregory and I have been avenged.

If Harry had only taken time to read Gregory's brochure, he would have learned that Gregory was a Lantana Camera, an attractive garden plant, often used for potting. But they warn you to cut off the blossoms before they fruit.

The fruit is deadly.

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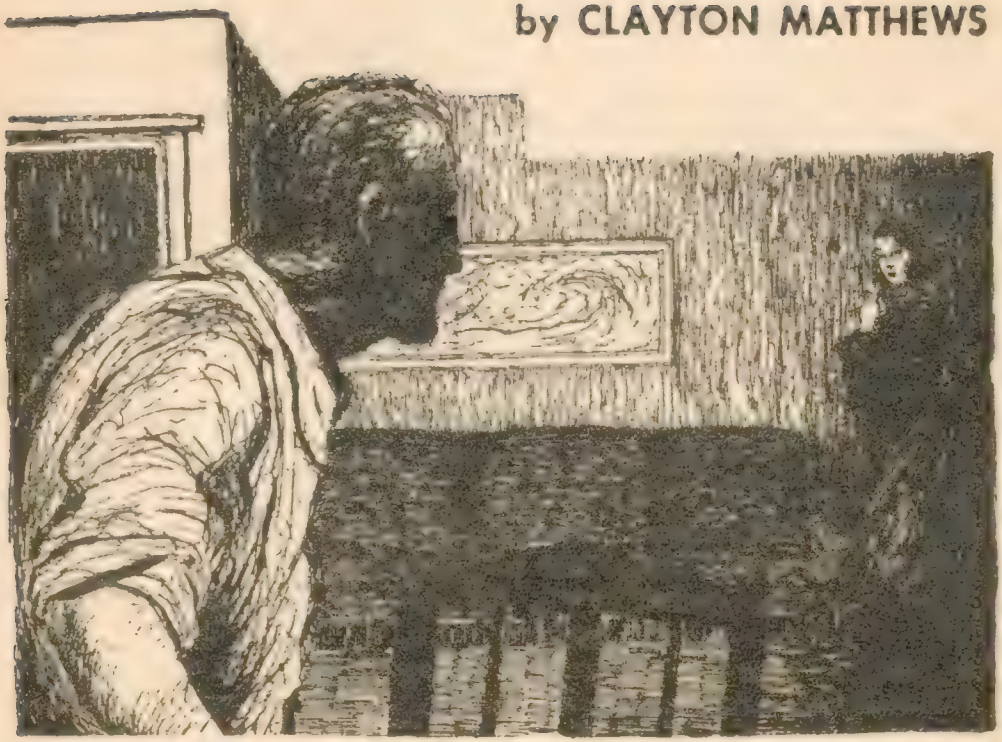
by CLAYTON MATTHEWS



RETURN HOME

Beauty was in that house. Beauty and dark murder. Which would be his lot?

DANNY MONROE came home after fifteen years away, not with a bang but with somewhat of a whimper, not riding in a Cadillac as he'd always dreamed of doing but walking the six miles from the paved highway down a dusty gravel road. There wasn't even a bus into Reesville, and the train had stopped running long before Danny left town.

Actually he'd never had a real home. Reesville was where he had gone through school, living with an aunt. But during those years since he'd left to make his fortune Reesville was always the town he named as his last permanent address when such information was required of him.

More important, Rachel Holman still lived in Reesville, and

Rachel was the reason for his long-delayed homecoming.

Danny Monroe was shocked when he walked down Elm Street. Reesville had been dying when he left. Now it reminded him of a ghost town. Or better yet, a Hollywood set constructed for a movie taking place during the Depression days of the Thirties, the film finished and the set gathering dust.

Monroe knew about Hollywood sets. It had been one of his dreams to become a movie star. The closest he'd ever come to realizing that particular dream had been working as an extra, a faceless cipher in numerous crowd scenes.

There were two cars parked on Elm and not a soul in sight. Of course it was high noon and as hot as it can only get in Texas in August. Few of the buildings seemed occupied. There was the bank building on the corner, for instance. The bank had closed its doors long since, yet it was still there, unoccupied, the windows boarded up.

And there next to the bank was Charlie's Notions. Danny Monroe remembered old Charlie. He had been somewhere around fifty, with a fish-white face and the gross body of a toad. He had sleeping quarters in back of the store, and it was said that old Charlie never ventured out into the sun. The high school kids used to hang around the store, drinking pop out of the cooler or buying candy from the fly-specked case. Charlie squatted behind the counter on a high stool, making change from a cigar box.

The county was dry, the nearest legal liquor fifty miles away. Charlie always had a few bottles in stock, hidden under the counter.

The door was open. Danny set his suitcase down and went in. He took a Coke from the cooler before he moved on down the counter.

Charlie was there, on his high stool. Fifteen years hadn't changed him in the least. He still looked like a toad.

Danny Monroe flipped a dime onto the counter and gulped at the Coke before saying, "Remember me, Charlie? Danny Monroe?"

"Can't say as I do, boy."

"I went to high school on the hill up there." Monroe jerked his thumb toward the hill brooding over the town. "After school I used to hang around in here with the rest of the kids."

"High school's been closed down four, five years now."

"That figures," Monroe muttered. "The Holmans, they still live up there on the hill?" He held his breath. After all, it had been more than six months since the letter from Dean. . .

"Reckon they do, the last I heard," Charlie said. "Old Brice is bedridden and Rachel's been tending him hand and foot. Been that way ten years now, about."

Monroe drained the Coke, thumped the bottle down on the counter and strode out. He walked the short block to the end of the street, turned sharp right and stopped, staring at the hill a quarter mile away.

There it was, the Holman house.

It was the only two-story house on the hill. There was nothing particularly sinister about the place, yet Monroe felt a shiver pass over him like a cold breath of wind. It had been the same in the old days. He had never been inside the house. During that last year of high school when he had walked Rachel home every afternoon, she had never once invited him inside.

In her fierce pride Rachel didn't offer an apology, but Monroe knew why. Her father. If she lingered outside talking to Monroe, soon Brice Holman's harsh voice would boom out from inside the house. "Get your tail in this house, girl! Don't be hanging around outside all day!"

Rachel's face would get a pinched look. She would whisper good-by to Danny Monroe, then scurry inside. Brice Holman had been healthy enough in those days but short of temper and plain mean. It wasn't likely that the passage of time and being bedridden had improved his disposition any.

Monroe hefted his suitcase and trudged up the steep hill.

Monroe was slight, slender, with thick blond hair and restless brown eyes. He had a certain appeal for women, something he had early learned about himself and used to an advantage. But he'd never been able to land the big one. He'd found it wasn't so easy to marry a wealthy woman.

Oh, he could play the gigolo bit often enough, could tumble them into bed, but marriage was a different can of peas. They were either too ugly, too wary, or their money was tied up. The easy life of a kept man was fine, but Danny Monroe wanted control of big money.

That was the reason he was back in Reesville. There was one person he had kept in touch with down through the years, Dean Radford, a high school chum. Nowadays, Dean was a traveling salesman and stopped off in Reesville every year or so. Also every year he sent Monroe a Christmas card with a gossipy note enclosed.

Monroe vividly recalled the pertinent part of the last note: *Danny Boy, guess who I can into on my last trip to the old home town? Rachel Holman! You*

know, I hadn't seen that old girl in years and years. Didn't you two have a thing going once? Anyway, she's still not a bad-looking chick but she's cold as a fish these days, a real old-maid type. I asked around about her afterwards.

Seems Brice had an accident ten, eleven years back, leaving him virtually paralyzed. Rachel has been tied down ever since taking care of him, just the two of them in that spooky old house on the hill. Old Brice is too tight to hire someone when he's got a daughter handy. He wouldn't let anyone come near her before the accident, I reckon you found that out, and no boy would come around afterwards, not wanting to be saddled with that old bastard.

And all the time those oil wells have been pumping and pumping. Think of all that green stuff piling up for the man that marries Rachel after Brice is gone! If by that time she'll let *any man come near her. I pretty much doubt it. She's turned into a real spook. . .*

In the old days the house had at least been well-cared for. Now the paint was peeling. The front yard was rank with weeds. One of the front steps had rotted away. The screens were torn. The door to the screen porch hung aslant on one hinge.

Danny Monroe knocked on the door for a long time before he finally heard a faint stirring within and slow footsteps. The door opened a few inches.

The light inside was dim, and he could barely make out the pale blur of a face. "Rachel?"

"Come in, Danny." For all the emotion her voice showed he could have just stepped out for a sandwich. The door opened wide, and Monroe edged inside. The house had a musty odor.

The thing that shocked him the most was Rachel's appearance. She had always been neat, well-groomed. Now her long black hair was lank, uncombed. Her house dress was soiled and hung askew. Her face was without makeup, her gray eyes dull. Her figure was thin, gaunted. Yet there was about her features the same melancholy loveliness he remembered so well.

Under his searching gaze a flicker of life showed in her eyes, and one hand crept up to finger her hair.

"You don't seem too surprised to see me." He tried to keep it light.

"You said you'd be back some day, Danny. But it has been a long time."

"That it has, Rachel. I'll agree to that."

"I have a pitcher of lemonade in the refrigerator. Maybe you'd like some on a hot day like this."

He followed her down the hall. To his left, doors opened into dim rooms cluttered with ancient furniture. To his right, the stairway mounted to the second floor. Monroe found himself listening tensely for the rumble of Brice Holman's voice.

The kitchen was a surprise. On the west side of the house, it was sunny, airy, and sparkling clean. The appliances were old but immaculate and in good working order. Danny Monroe had the feeling that much of Rachel's time was spent in the kitchen.

Somehow, during the walk to the kitchen, she had managed to pin the lank hair back. She had tucked and tugged at the dress until it wasn't quite so shapeless, her cheeks had spots of color as though she'd pinched them. Her gaze kept jumping to him, then away.

Monroe sat down at the kitchen table. Rachel stood at the sink pouring the lemonade, her back to him. He said, "There hasn't been a day gone by I haven't thought of you, Rachel."

Her reaction was satisfactory. She stopped what she was doing, her back going rigid, and stood absolutely still.

"You should have come away with me, Rachel."

"I was only seventeen, Danny, and you were eighteen. We were too young." Her voice trembled

slightly. "And there was Daddy."

"Yeah, your father. How is he?"

"Not good. His heart is very weak." The question seemed to steady her. She went on pouring the lemonade. Pride strengthened her voice. "I've been taking care of him. Right after the accident, I hired a woman to come in and I became a student nurse, driving over to the county hospital every day for a year until I learned enough to tend him myself."

She came to the table with two glasses of lemonade and sat down across from him.

Monroe took a swallow of the lemonade. It was cold, tart, very good. "That's tied you down pretty much, hasn't it?"

"I don't mind," Rachel said. "He's my daddy. I'm happy to tend him."

"You've never married, have you?"

"I've got time." She tossed her head. "Besides, there's never

been any old boy around I wanted to marry."

"I've never married either, Rachel," he said softly. "Every time I've even considered it, I found myself comparing her with you and she always came up missing."

Her glance slid away. "Why did you come back, Danny?"

"Why? You've heard the saying, 'You can't go home again?' I thought I'd try it and find out. When I left here I was going to make a big splash. The only splash I made you could hide in your left eye," he said with disarming frankness. "Reesville is the only home I ever knew. I thought I'd come back here, lick my wounds and make a fresh start. Most of all, I wanted to see you, Rachel. I thought you'd be happy to—"

She faced him. "But I am glad to see you, Danny! Of course I am!" Her breath caught, and she looked away again. "Do you have a place to stay?"

Monroe said carefully, 'I haven't looked around yet, but I'll find a place."

"I don't know where. You know there isn't a hotel, motel, not even a rooming house in Reesville. Why don't you stay here? There's plenty of room."

"Wouldn't I be putting you to a lot of trouble?"

"It'll be no trouble, Danny. Just the opposite."

"Won't your father have something to say about it?"

"Daddy won't say a word, don't worry."

"Okay," Monroe said abruptly, as though he'd reached a sudden decision. "I'll make a deal with you. I see a lot of things that need fixing around here. I'll earn my keep."

"I know." Rachel gestured vaguely. "I've let the place run down, except for—My life seems to revolve around the kitchen and Daddy's room upstairs."

The next day Danny Monroe learned why she had been so positive Brice Holman would have nothing to say. Rachel took him by the hand and led him into her father's bedroom. She said calmly, "Daddy, this is Danny Monroe. Maybe you remember him. He's staying with us for awhile."

Monroe remembered Brice Holman as a big man. The arms outside the covers were still large, powerful, the shoulders broad, but the rest of the man had shrunk to skeleton thinness. His faded blue eyes blazed fiercely at Monroe. His mouth worked. But no words came from him.

Rachel said, "Daddy hasn't been able to speak for some time."

DANNY MONROE puttered around the place, fixing this and

that. He was made a little uneasy by the condition of the house. Maybe Dean was wrong; maybe the Holman money was gone. Rachel gave him free rein of the house and a little stealthy snooping soon set his mind at rest. He found bank books all over. A rough calculation told him that the cash on deposit in various banks totaled at least a hundred thousand and there were also stocks and bonds.

There was a four-year-old Ford in the garage, the battery dead, tires flat. Danny got it running again and drove five miles out of town to what had once been the Holman ranch. The derricks were gone, but the wells were still pumping, acres of them, the pumps pecking away at the earth like ponderous insects.

A week passed, then a month, and nothing was said about his leaving. Monroe puttered, his mind busy with plans. Rachel spent most of the time with her father, refusing to leave the house even for a drive. Now that Danny Monroe was there, she even delegated the grocery shopping to him. But her hair was combed these days, her dresses clean and freshly ironed.

One thing troubled Monroe. He couldn't get close to her at all. Every time he tried to talk of the times they walked home from school, she became nervous, flustered, and refused to reminisce.

Once he offered to take her to a movie over at the county seat, maybe dinner afterward.

"Oh, I couldn't do that," she said, hands fluttering in agitation. "Daddy might need me!"

Yet Monroe had no doubt but that things would go right with Rachel when the time came.

The time was not yet. There remained the problem of Brice Holman. Dr. Frank Cunningham, the town's only doctor, in his seventies and semi-retired, came to the house once a week.

During one visit Monroe managed to be working at the side of the house when the doctor came out. "How is he, Doc? How's Brice doing?"

Dr. Cunningham squinted at him out of rheumy eyes. His breath reeked with gin. He snapped, "He's dying, what else?"

Danny Monroe stared. "Dying?"

"He may die tonight. He may live another ten years. His heart's going but he's a fighter, is old Brice." The doctor got into his car, then stuck his head out the window. "Especially if he thinks all that damned money might fall into the wrong hands and him with no way to take it with him!" He cackled laughter, started his ancient car and rattled off.

Danny Monroe stood looking after him. Brice Holman had to go. Marrying Rachel might gain Monroe access to the money, but he wouldn't have control of it until her father was dead and buried.

He began planning ways and means.

It didn't have to be anything too elaborate, just something that a casual examination would pass off as heart failure. Dr. Cunningham, half-smashed most of the time and expecting Brice Holman to die any minute, would put it down as a heart attack and that would be that. So long as the doctor didn't suspect anything, there would be no questioning of his death certificate, no autopsy performed.

At first Monroe thought of using some drug, some kind of poison, something not easily detected. He made an almost daily trek down to Charlie's Notions for a bottle of whiskey. The store had a good supply of drugs, animal poisons, et cetera, on the dusty shelves. It would be no trick at all to pocket one without Charlie knowing of it.

He finally discarded it as too risky. In the first place, he didn't know enough about poisons. In the second place, anything he picked off the shelf in Charlie's place could have been there since the launching of the Ark and could have long since lost its effectiveness. Monroe knew he would have only the one chance. Brice Holman couldn't talk, true, but he could communicate well enough with Rachel. If the old man suspected Monroe of trying to kill him, that would end it right there.

Finally he found the answer. Rachel subscribed to several medical journals for their articles on nursing. Monroe plowed through them one by one. Most of what he read he didn't understand, but he kept at it. In one issue over a year old, he found what he needed to know. He read the article twice. A person with a failing heart needed a full supply of oxygen to survive. Cut that supply of oxygen for a brief time and the patient would die, dead of a heart attack brought on for the struggle for oxygen. All he had to do was slip a pillow over the old man's head, careful not to leave any marks.

The next night he waited until after Rachel had gone to bed. Then he slipped into some clothes, took a pillow from the bed, and went down the hall to Brice Holman's room. He eased the door open. He could hear the man's stentorian breathing. There was a full moon, throwing enough light through the window to allow him to see the figure under the sheet.

Danny Monroe catfooted across to the bed, held the pillow suspended over the sleeping face for a moment, then swooped down.

It was ridiculously easy. The old man's muscular arms thrashed once, then he was still. The sound of loud breathing stopped. Monroe took the pillow away and felt for a pulse. Finding none, he closed the door quietly and returned to his own room. He undressed and fell across the bed, going to sleep at once.

He was awakened in the morning by the sound of muted voices outside his door. He got dressed quickly and went out into the hall. The door to Brice Holman's room stood open, and Danny Monroe could see Dr. Cunningham stooping over the bed.

Rachel came toward him. Her features were solemn, but there was no sign of tears. "Daddy passed away in his sleep in the night. I found him that way when I went in this morning."

Monroe assumed a look of concern. "Why didn't you get me up?"

"There was no need. I managed everything," she said calmly.

The funeral was two days later, in the little cemetery on the edge of town. The town's total population was there, as well as a number of people from

outside. Danny Monroe knew he was the subject of much speculation among the townspeople, it was the first time most of them had seen him since his return, but he was sure they knew he had been living at the Holman place. He couldn't have cared less. Everything was going his way now.

During the past two days many people had filed in and out of the house. Monroe had stayed out of sight. At the cemetery now he stood a little apart from Rachel, but he cast an up-and-under glance in her direction from time to time.

She looked good in mourning black. She was pale now, of

course, but not nearly so pale as on the day of his return home. One thing bothered him a little. Her composure struck him as unnatural. He hadn't seen her shed a single tear. Even now she stood erect, gloved hands folded before her, eyes steady and tearless. He supposed she had been expecting her father's death for such a long time that she had experienced no great shock when it finally happened. Perhaps she even felt a measure of relief, a heavy burden lifted.

They shared the back seat of the funeral parlor limousine going away from the cemetery. Out of a long silence Rachel spoke, "Danny, will you be staying on?"

Monroe started to assure her that he would, then thought better of it. Instead he said, "For a little while, Rachel. Until things settle down. But I'll soon have to move on, I can't stay here forever."

"Can't you, Danny?" She faced him, her expression unreadable. "Not even if I—"

She bit down hard on her lower lip and turned away.

Monroe leaned back, content, sure she'd been about to ask him to stay forever. He would wait a decent interval, say a month, and ask her to marry him. There wasn't the least doubt in his mind about her accepting.

That evening, after Rachel was asleep, Monroe sneaked down the hill to Charlie's. He bought a full quart this time and took it back to his room. He had reason to celebrate. Brice Holman was dead and buried.

He awoke some time in the night with a pounding head and a raging thirst. He rolled out of bed with a curse. The bathroom was just down the hall, but he needed about a gallon of ice water. He groped his way to the head of the stairs and started down without turning on a light. He didn't want to arouse Rachel. He knew he was still half-drunk, and he doubted she would appreciate his getting smashed only a few hours after her father had been put into the ground.

Halfway down the stairs a sharp pain cut across his shins like the slash of a knife blade, and he tumbled headlong. He heard a snapping sound, and agony blossomed in his knee. Another pain clawed at his side. Just before he landed at the bottom of the stairs, his head cracked against the wall, and blackness descended like the snapping of a shutter.

When he returned to full consciousness, he was in bed in his room, and it was morning, some time just before noon, judging from the slant of sunlight coming in the window. Monroe was dazed, his thoughts syrupy. He tried to recall what had

happened. He had fallen down the stairs. . .something eluded him here. . .His head had whacked the wall and he had passed out. After that came a montage of hazy impressions of being pulled, tugged, hauled, pain like flashes of lightning in his skull, followed by blackouts. Obviously he had been lugged upstairs.

But how? And who? Not Rachel, surely. Not alone. She didn't have the strength.

And why had he fallen? He'd been a little drunk, but not *that* drunk. Something tugged at his mind again. . .

He raised his head and gazed down the length of his body. His right leg was mummified in yards of tape, crudely splinted, and elevated on two thick pillows. And now he realized he had trouble breathing. He tried to draw a deep breath, and pain exploded in his left side. He explored with his fingers and discovered he was bandaged there as well. Some ribs were broken.

He let his head fall back in exhaustion, cold sweat beading him from head to foot. After a moment he heard the door open. He raised his head again.

Rachel was coming toward him, smiling brightly. "How are you feeling, Danny?"

Danny Monroe grunted. "Lousy as hell! How did I—"

"Why, you fell down the stairs."

"I know that, but how did I get up here?"

"I got you up."

"You! How the hell did you—"

"I managed." Her eyes glittered. "I always managed with Daddy, didn't I?"

"That's hardly the same thing." Monroe was growing increasingly uneasy. He nodded to his leg. "Did you do all that?"

"Of course."

"Have you called Doc Cunningham?"

"We don't need him. I'll take care of you without him. We don't need anybody in. Just us, Danny. Dr. Cunningham's coming around didn't keep Daddy from dying."

Fully alarmed now, Danny Monroe tried to sit up and failed. "But my leg and some ribs are broken. I need a doctor!"

"Nobody comes in this house ever again." Her smile was fixed, her eyes as opaque as colored glass. "I'll take care of you just like I did Daddy. You won't have to leave now, Danny, not ever! It'll be wonderful, you'll see, just the two of us—"

Her voice trailed off and she left the room. She seemed to float, her feet barely touching the floor.

And then Monroe remembered what had been bugging

him. He hadn't just stumbled and fallen.

There had been a wire stretched across the stairs, striking him across the legs.

Rachel had rigged a wire to trip him!

And she would tend him until he died. Or if he by some chance healed she would arrange another accident.

He had to get out and get out now. He inched his way across the bed, ignoring the pain. He teetered on the edge of the bed for a long moment, and then fell heavily, landing on the floor on his left side. He screamed, screamed again.

"Rachel!" His voice didn't carry. "Help me! Somebody help me!"

Finally he fell silent. Nobody was going to help him, he would have to help himself. He throttled back the panic and began to scheme. There *had* to be a way.

If he could make Rachel's obsession work *for* him—

She liked to tend the sick, did she? So long as he was flat on his back, unable to get up, she would be content to nurse him. He had always been a fast healer. All he needed to do was fake it. He had wanted to be an actor, now was his chance. Keep her thinking he was unable to make it through that door and down the stairs, then pick a time when Rachel was fast asleep, worn out from a day's nursing.

Danny Monroe wasn't whipped yet.

"Rachel, come help me," he called.

In a moment he heard her footsteps in the hall. Danny lay back, groaning loudly, and waited patiently for Rachel to come help him back into bed.

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ASHES TO ASHES

by

GERALD FRANKLYN

A proud old building, she was, now old and dying. Two men who had loved her came to see her end. Only one would come out. . .

ON THE HEELS of yet another champagne toast, it appeared to all that Charles Gorth was about to rise. "On the heels" was metaphorically apt, since Charlie Gorth was in an alcoholic state.

As he teetered over the table like a pick-up-stick uncertain in which direction it would fall, six lungs held in breaths and hoped Charlie Gorth would not topple forward and become part of the table's centerpiece, which was an ice sculpture of a prominent town building.

With Gorth's tenuous state the center of attention, Angelica

Gorth used the diversion to stare across the table into Girroux's eyes. The look would have melted the ice figurine had Girroux been seated behind it.

Meanwhile, Charlie Gorth was working his lips into shape for a speech. Keeping one hand on the table to steady himself, he raised his glass high in the air.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the late and deeply lamented Horace Springer! May he forgive and pass from his mind the fate which has befallen him! May he take his money to an island paradise and commence to spend his twilight years in the company of tall, lime-colored drinks and tall bronze-skinned ladies. May he indulge all the lavish pleasures befitting a rich, dirty old man!"

"Yes, to Horace Springer!" came the echoing toast from the Banderros, the Ullmans, Angelica Gorth and Claude Girroux.

Dangerously, Charlie Gorth found his seat and then George Banderro rose. With a filled glass he indicated Girroux.

"Thus far this evening," Banderro stated, "we have toasted everyone but our maitre d' hotel and everything but this melting replica of a once-proud edifice whose demise we celebrate this evening. But we have not toasted the man who has made our good fortune possible. And so, ladies and gentlemen, I give you Claude Girroux, the unquestioned master mind of our close-knit business organization. I specifically, now toast The Girroux Corporation Hi-Rise Parking Garage and its president, Claude Girroux!"

The wave of instant applause set Claude Girroux into a warm wave of memory. Horace Springer was the unfortunate business soul from whom Girroux had purchased the old Orpheum-Grand Theater, his fifth foxy purchase of ancient theatrical palaces in as many years.

A swift change in American attitudes had brought great wealth to Girroux at little cost. When people began escaping to suburbia in the fifties, a businessman with less economic acumen than Girroux might have read this mass exodus as the beginning of city rot where nothing would be left but a casbah of thieves and rogues who would prey on those who found themselves incapable of escape.

But Girroux read it differently. He saw the exodus as a subtle statement by Americans that they no longer were willing to live, shop and be entertained in the city. They would still endure the odious responsibility of driving there, parking there and working there, but that was as far as they would go.

Furtively, quietly, Claude Girroux set to work. From land investments in the suburbs which

paid quick and handsome rewards, he returned a portion of his capital to the city, purchasing the land on which sat five of the city's finest and most venerable old theaters. Times were changing drastically and Girroux could feel the impulses of the balances shifting. He held the mood, style and thoughts of 1960 America in the palm of his greedy hands. And they itched to be filled with dollars.

With plenty of reserve capital, Girroux stuck it out. He held tight to his patience. And he kept with his instincts.

And then, in 1960, it broke: television. Across the screens of sets all across suburbia, precise color was splashed. And the final justification for driving long distances to see a motion picture was dashed beyond repair.

The profits for the five theaters standing on Girroux land failed to register a profit. For the next three years, he visited his five white elephants religiously, like a perverse play producer begging his work as a box office flop for important tax credits.

He was pleased by what he saw. Balconies, once jammed with top hats and flowery dresses in the forties and teenagers in later years now were occupied by a handful of women shoppers and their children. All five were dying and Girroux watched their blood run out like a sadist at a head-on auto collision.

In 1965, the leases began running out. One by one, his five theaters began to drop to their carpetted knees—the Paramount-Regency, the Emory Palace, the Palomar, the Coliseum.

And one by one, the Girroux Corporation began filling the city's skyline with lucrative alternatives: The Girroux Building, the Claude Girroux Trade Mart, the C.G. Downtown Garage, the Girroux International Hotel.

Now, Girroux's mind was hiked back into the present. Theodore Ullman was rising to propose another toast. Girroux noted Charlie Gorth as his heavy head nodded on his chest. His condition once more allowed Angelica Gorth to send her pink tongue out to lick deliciously at her lips as the raging, violet eyes bore into Girroux's.

"Friends, and business associates," said Ted Ullman, "I present the object of tomorrow's sad funeral, the innocent bystander in the merciless uncompromising way of progress. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Orpheum-Grande Theater which, in its time, provided entertainment to millions. Tomorrow, before the onslaught of two wrecking balls, its sides will collapse, to be transplanted with walls and floors of a parking

garage which will rise to a height only a man like Claude Girroux could have imagined! And so let us solemnly present our glasses toward this dwindling figure in ice. Let us toast memory, death and progress!"

It was Lydia Ullman who added, ". . .we therefore commit its body to the ground; earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. . ."

The hour was late, nearly one o'clock. Buffie Banderro suggested they repair to the Red Lion for more drinks and whooping, roast duck in orange sauce and snails. Everyone agreed loudly.

Claude Girroux politely declined. It was his steadfast rule to socialize with business partners as rarely as possible. To gain certain tax advantages, his five in-town business ventures were comprised of different sets of investors and partners and to be seen in the company of one group by a member of another was not a wise business practice. Besides, his morning would be taken up with two projects, each best done in private.

The first he solidified as they made their way to the Olympic-Regis' covered esplanade where cars were being driven up by attendants for the two-mile drive for an early breakfast. When Charlie Gorth groggily stopped off for cigarettes in the hotel lobby, Girroux whispered quickly in Angelica's ear, "Three o'clock."

"Our favorite place?"

"No. I've taken a room here in the Olympic for the weekend. I want to watch tomorrow's razing. Room 1445."

"He's so drunk I could pour him into the car and come up there with you right now. God, do you have any idea how badly I want to touch you?"

"Three o'clock," Girroux said, supressing an identical need.

"Two hours. I'll go crazy without you."

"Bite on a bullet," Girroux told her.

Outside, with Girroux waving good-bye, the cars moved off into the night. From the window of a dark blue '71 Chrysler, he saw Angelica Gorth cast him a wanton look that might have melted anything but safety glass.

ALONE NOW, Claude Girroux made his way back through the nearly vacant Olympic-Regis lobby and downstairs to the Native Outrigger Bar. He slipped into a high-backed leatherette chair and ordered a martini, extra dry, with Tanqueray gin. He looked about the room, searching for the face of Harold Stinger, the man whom Charlie Gorth had drunkenly eulogized earlier.

He had invited Stringer to

have a drink with him, for old time's sake, to indulge each other in reminiscences of changing times. But Harold Stringer still had not arrived. Girroux forgave him his tardiness. When a man was on the verge of losing everything, a thing like this took some working up to.

Girroux sipped the gin and considered their relationship.

Over the years, it had been no holds barred. But their friendship during these tumultuous years and the sad decline of theater palaces had been respectful. They were fighting a rough war and each man had held tightly to a separate idea. But Stringer had laid all his eggs in the wrong basket and they had spoiled.

Horace Stringer, however, was not a begrudging or vindictive man. Like the four other theater owners before him, he had lost; and he would take that inevitable loss nobly and well.

He had taken it so well, in fact, that tonight, as an era drew to an end, Springer had consented to drinks and reminiscences for old time's sake and later would walk with Girroux through the old Orpheum-Grande Theater as they gave the ghostly edifice a final farewell before morning struck itself on the horizon. Though legally, if only temporarily, the building was now owned by Girroux Corporation, Girroux felt he owed the old man at least that.

Fifteen minutes and another martini passed. Horace Springer was late or finding it difficult to show up at all.

Girroux ordered a third from an ancient bartender who was of Springer's vintage, late fifties or early sixties.

The life-weary eyes seemed to regard Girroux as an outsider who was a generation behind the crowd which usually gathered in the Native Outrigger at this early hour—worn out newspaper reporters who were about at the "30" point in their careers, midtown dowagers who, so close to death, were a little afraid to succumb to sleep. Old news-dealers, and track touts and ancient clarinetists in the few dance orchestras left in town.

Girroux sipped at his third martini. "Horace Springer been in tonight?"

The old eyes softened. "Owns the Orpheum-Grande over on Ninth? That Horace Springer?"

Girroux nodded, keeping his identity as the building's new owner to himself. To some, it was a little like being a murderer.

"Horace usually stops in at five o'clock. That's when I come on. Bloody Mary with lime juice. Thirty years, he hasn't missed a night."

"And tonight?"

"Tonight, he misses. And last night he also misses, now that I think about it. Only one thing keeps Horace Springer from his Bloody Mary and that's business troubles. They say they're gonna level the old Orpheum-Grande and that'll leave old Horace sitting on a pile of bricks."

"And he didn't stop in later? Tonight?"

"Didn't see him and didn't serve him, but I can't say for sure about that."

The old bartender was lingering, his eyes misting the way eyes do when someone is building up to reminiscences.

"Saw the first stage show in the old Orpheum-Grande. Know who was on the bill?"

"No, I don't," said Girroux.

"No, you look a little too much on the young side to recall back then," said the old bartender. "Was 1926. The Sunkist Beauty Review Girls and Phil Morgan's Sunshine Orchestra. Had a pretty good comic on that bill too, but I don't remember his name."

Girroux nodded. "It's sad to see an era draw to a close," he said.

"Television's the culprit. And the bad element, the rabble and riff-raff. People just moved out of the city without shedding a tear or waving good-by. Hypocrites, they are, saying how they love the city. All they do is sneak into it at nine o'clock in the morning, make their money, and then run out at five o'clock like bandits."

"Suburban bandits in their getaway cars," said Girroux, knowing the old man would like

the way he was siding with the dying element. He did.

"If you see Horace Stringer tonight, tell him Mr. Girroux has gone over for a last look at the Orpheum-Grande."

"Girroux. I'll tell him. Only the way things have been going for Horace lately, I don't think he'll be coming in here much any more. It's the way the world goes. Take away a man's work and you take away his pride. Take his pride, and he either does something desperate or just crawls away."

"Well, if you should see him."

As an epigramatic eulogy for Horace Springer it fitted like a truck through a mid-block alley. His life signed away now to Girroux Corporation, Springer had probably done the one thing a jobless, prideless man can do. Find a comfortable crack in the woodwork and have his air and food piped in through the opening.

The city's summer was dying an early October death. Through a purple sky a wind tore with devil-speed, brisk and biting like a jilted lover's good-by. In another hour, the streets would get an indifferent scrubbing and at four o'clock the ghostly limbo would explode with the invasion of garbage and produce trucks. But now, at this empty moment, it was a bad time for humans to be about.

Girroux buttoned his topcoat, bringing the expensive mink collar tight against his neck to combat the hungry wind. All at once fire trucks began crying out like a baby's first wail. The sound made him shudder where years ago he would only have shrugged.

American cities were slowly, insidiously coming to this, coming to huge bonfires in the trembling, enraged hands of maniacs and madmen.

These fires were lit by drugged young animals, disgruntled over breaking into a downtown firm to find only a five dollar bill. Vengeful former employees lit them. And they were lit by troubled humans whose life-long nightmares about their sexuality which never ended, nevertheless felt the queer, necessary ecstasy. And shrewd businessmen lit them and walked away from the ashes with either money in their pockets or shackles on their wrists.

But the terrifying siren wails frightened Girroux most when he thought of them in personal terms. One day, one deal, he would make the wrong kind of enemy and then morning would dawn on the sizzle and the smells of one of his enterprises being shovelled into a dozen dump trucks. He was heavily insured, but insurance could never dispel the fear of the possibility.

MIDWAY DOWN the 900 block of Seneca Street, down an alley, an unattended derrick sat waiting. Still the cruel wind blew unrelenting, a wild vortex slamming angrily at the hillside. Claude Girroux paused and looked at the derrick, its giant steel ball slacked and asleep. A second derrick stood two hundred feet farther down the alley, the six-story office building behind it boarded and buttressed against the morning's coming violence. The Orpheum-Grande was in for no slow and painful death. It would be struck from the east and south in its belly and in its brain. It would die quickly.

Girroux continued past the alley, to the fire exit halfway down Seneca Street, whose flush doorlock would accept his key. A policeman stood guard, judging Girroux's approach warily.

"Good morning, officer.'

"Move along, Mac. This building's condemned."

"I'm aware of that," Girroux told him, presenting his wallet. "I own it and the land under it. I just stopped by for a final look around inside before it topples tomorrow."

The city patrolman checked Girroux's identification and seemed convinced of its authenticity. "How long do you intend to be inside, Mr. Girroux?"

"Just long enough to feel the memories and ghosts and to honor the years."

"Well, that's okay with me if you want to shake a little dust on your clothes, Mr. Girroux. But you'd better come back out this same exit. We got another man guarding the front entrance. Wouldn't want you to be shot for a prowler, sir."

"I understand," said Girroux. "I'll be no longer than ten or fifteen minutes, officer."

Once behind the fire exit door, Girroux could feel the ghosts beckoning him in. Rudy Vallee, Ruby Keeler, Gypsy Rose Lee, and hundreds more stood in mute invisibility around him.

In truth, Girroux had never sanctioned stage shows and their narcisstic, egomaniacal performers. Only rarely had he ever been a member of a first night audience, once at a performance of a Civil War drama starring Raymond Massey as he remembered, and on one or two other gala occasions, whose participants he could not now recall. The chorus girls and male dancers, the jugglers and slapstick comics were to him nothing but perfumed and painted cattle stampeding up and down winding metal staircases and in and out of dressing room doors.

A long row of overhead stage lights fell dimly on stage props and equipment Girroux had not sold at auction. Only every third

light was lit so that the bulky equipment appeared like entertainers resting between rehersals. As Girroux passed them slowly, the flooring creaked and gave beneath his feet, taking his footfalls and hurling them in echoes in a hundred directions. Everywhere was the dust and gloom and silence of a thing finally gone dead: vaudeville.

The stage's masses of heavy curtains had been auctioned to a wholesale upholstery firm so that now, no barrier existed between the Orpheum-Grande's stage and its auditorium.

Girroux walked out onto the apron. The huge orchestra pit was an empty cavity of silence, the small finger-platform to its left a large square of dustlessness where the pipe organ had stood. Eight incredibly high stories above him, the room's ceiling spread itself in quiet; submissively it waited for its end.

Girroux made his way back to the stage, aware that ten of his promised twenty minutes with the corpse had lapsed. Briefly, he noted ancient painted warnings which would no longer be heeded. Pasted to the wall, a curling, yellowed copy of a news article out of the past from The Shanghai *China Press*, reading in part. . ."...the wide gulf of waters of the blue Pacific, by some Oriental wizadry had been voided and they were in China, within a glittering world of indescribable opulence and splendor, making the Orpheum-Grande likely the first American theater after the Chinese manner and decor. . ."

Girroux carefully tore the delapidated news report from the wall to keep as a souvenir.

His time was running out. Quickly he noted it all once more and then spent a few seconds, staring at the ancient elevator in the darkened distance.

It was while he was on his way back to the fire exit door that Claude Girroux remembered a final piece of business he had neglected to finish. It involved a minor matter which he had discussed with Horace Stringer when the building's ownership had been painfully transferred to Girroux—twenty-five dressing room mirrors still propped on dressing counters in the chorus girls dressing rooms in the fifth floor.

The mirrors were framed in carved wood and decorously gilded with several coats of superficial opulence. Purchased in China at some expense, they now were valueless except as souvenirs. In fact, a small argument had developed over them. Springer had wanted to distribute them to friends and relatives and the perpetual fool that he was, expected Girroux

would present them to him as a gift. But to Girroux, the mirrors, worthless as they were, offered him a final knife thrust into Springer dying pride.

He told Springer he would be pleased to make them a gift, but that his owns plans called for them to be installed in units of an apartment building he was thinking of erecting across town. In truth, he wanted Horace Springer left with nothing. The mirrors, in truth, would be hurled into the city refuse dump. It would be like hurling Horace Springer's own body on to the garbage heap.

With perverse triumph beating on his chest, Claude Girroux moved to the ascending circle of steel which bore through five invisible floors and into the stage's ceiling, above his head, and began to climb up. The higher he was taken, the more pronounced became its sway. Twice he had to stop because its vacillating seemed at the point of collapse.

Girroux had never got rid of his fear of heights. He had no stomach for making the several trips back down with the mirrors. He would simply pile them near the dressing room's door and then instruct the city to have them removed before the building's demolition began.

When the twisting staircase of steel ceased its shuddering, Girroux resumed his ascent. Now that he knew its peculiarities he went more carefully. But as he ascended, he sensed something wrong about it, something unreal and out-of-place. Twice he made abrupt halts and listened. And then twice more. And then he was frighteningly certain of it beyond any doubt. Someone was following him up the steel staircase.

Subtly the footballs were trying to match Girroux's own, but they were falling an infinitesimal, split-second late. Once more Girroux stopped. And once more the slender sound that was not his own echo came.

FOR AN instant Claude Girroux considered descending to meet his follower. He rejected the idea as foolhardy. He saw himself confronting a pistol or knife; saw himself grappling with his pursuer on the tenuous shaft of steel which under both their weights would very probably disintegrate.

"Who is it?" Girroux said. "Who's there?"

Whoever it was, he had something in mind besides conversation. Without waiting, for Girroux's footsteps to resume, the follower's started up again.

Girroux heard fitful breathing a few short feet below him and

knew his pursuer was attacking now. Carelessly, Girroux shot into a trot, as the steel staircase shook under his feet as in an earth tremor. If he could make it to the fifth floor he might have some chance to defend himself, find something behind which to hide, discovered another exit route of escape.

On up into the darkness he raced, tripping himself at each sixth step, but not losing his balance. If he fell, he was done for. And if the staircase fell, they both were done for. They were not pretty alternatives.

At the top he discovered no relief. The giant loft was a bare, empty shell. Behind him still came the maniacal breathing, the little fits of laughter. . .the footsteps in insane pursuit.

Stretching out from him in two directions were the wide, vacant hallways, teasing him with their possible dead ends. If he was to stay alive, two things were vitally important. He mustn't become cornered. And he must somehow find a way out.

He was dealing with only a handful of seconds now. His pursuer had just a few dozens steps to go. The heavy wheezing was closer now, the thin, grating laughter louder.

And then he remembered. The elevator shaft! The shaft down which the elevator carried chorus girls to stage-level. Afixed to its wall, as a fire and safety precaution, was a wood ladder which ran to the ground. Passing on it between the elevator would be a tight fit and there was even no guarantee his weight would make it crumble to dust, but it was his only salvation.

In a burst, Girroux took off down the north hallway, where sixty feet away a thin wedge of dim light showed beneath the closed door of the chorus girls dressing room. He only prayed the door was not locked or nailed shut.

He reached it and tore on the door knob and as he did turned partially to see his pursuer. In his hand, held high above his head, a knife glinted. Glinting too, was a mass of steel at his waist, a chain which clinked against his body. The shadowy figure spotted Girroux and broke into a run, screaming in a thin shrilly wail

that could mean only one thing; that the voice and the man were pitching themselves for death.

Into the dressing room Girroux plunged, his panic and fear making objects dance in his eyes. He raced across the room's thin carpet of Oriental rug. His shoes told him it was slippery and squishy, wet from something. Rain from leaks in the ceiling, though he dimly recalled it hadn't rained in the city for days.

His fright filled eyes sought the door leading to the shaft. Across the narrow room it beckoned to him and Girroux lunged to it, twisting and tearing and jerking at its knob, pleading with the door to open until the small, sphere of copper came off in his hand. It was then he noticed what he first thought were small, decorative studs, dozens of them. They were nailheads.

When the high-pitched laughter fell across the room, Girroux whirled. What Horace Springer held in his hand was not a knife, put a nickel-plated .22-caliber pistol. He was grinning and salivating from his mouth and shaking with laughter.

Now, Girroux noticed the wood chair and ropes near a wood pillar in the center of the room. And the smells of fumes his nostrils had not before indentified. The rigging was not wet from rain water but from gasoline.

"Please sit in the chair, Mr. Girroux," came the squeaky order from Horace Springer. "After you've removed your topcoat. A rest will do you good, don't you think? You've had a long climb."

From behind, Claude Girroux felt his hands and wrists being forced around behind his back around the wooden pillar. The chains rattled at Springer's waist. Handcuffs. Wrists and ankles.

"You were probably surprised when I failed to show up for our drink, yes, Mr. Girroux? The truth is, I have been here for the past two days. In the theater. I knew you'd come back for the mirrors, just as I knew you'd remember the elevator shaft when I started after you up the staircase"

"*Why*, Stringer?" Girroux shouted, as he felt the ropes winding around his body. As he smelled the gasoline.

"Because you've taken everything from me. My work, my possession of this theater, my pride."

"Stringer, you're a fool! You won't get away with it!"

"No one will question the acts of a demented arsonist on a city-wide rampage. Yes, it was I who brought the sirens alive a while ago. A warehouse on the waterfront, a four-alarm in-

cident, leaving this section of the city woefully depleted of fire fighters and equipment. Once smoke is visible outside, it will take them an hour to pack up and get here."

"They'll know it was you, Springer! In time, they'll figure it all out."

"Oh, I suspect. But by then, I'll have all but vanished from the earth. Oh, your topcoat? Yes, well it's a nasty, blower out there tonight and I'll need it to keep me warm. And, of course, to put off the police officer who let you in. One man in. One man out. Dressed in an expensive fur-collared topcoat even a slow-witted patrolman will remember."

Horace Springer wiped the moisture from his lips and chin and gave the room a final look around.

"Well, I really think that covers everything, Mr. Girroux. That is, of course, except the match. And I may be an insane, slightly latent pyromaniac, Mr. Girroux. But I'm not quite that stupid."

Claude Girroux began struggling frantically when he saw Stringer produce a book of matches. Nervously Stringer tore a bunch of them away and posed them near the matchbook.

"Devilish wind out here tonight. Are you familiar with the vortex principles involving a westerly wind and a high of this general sculpture? The combination of these factors can create quite a breath-taking pyrotechnic display."

Girroux saw the small wad of matches flare into a small triangular candle of light.

"Of course, I could have been stupid enough to have forgotten matches," said Horace Stringer, in a cold tone of finality. "But everything would have worked out all right. You had these in your topcoat pocket."

THE GAMBLER

by JAMES HOLDING, JR.

A New Exciting Short Story Next Month

THE HIDDEN NUMBER

The phone rang and I shuddered. Sometimes a long distance call can be very long indeed. But — as far away as a grave?

by JOANN S. SCHEB

THE NUMBER was 958-4500.

It was a hidden number, neither listed in the directory nor available through the operator. But I suppose you could have got hold of it somehow. Or you could have dialed it by mistake. Either way, if you called it on the night of May 28, I wish you would get in touch with me right away.

No, I beg you to get in touch with me right away. You just might save my sanity.

The name was Gerard Fairweather. It was spelled out in luminous letters on the rural-type mailbox which balanced crazily on the end of the bent metal post I had just hit. I remember almost smiling to myself when I saw it because, believe me, that night of May 28 was anything but fair weather.

If you have never seen it rain in Florida, you have never seen it rain. The clouds don't just open. They burst. And the rain doesn't pour. It pounds. I hadn't been going fast, but I had driven off the road and hit the mailbox simply because I hadn't been able to see it.

Now, sitting still, I saw it. My windshield wipers were still working, and my headlights were still on, but my car wouldn't move either way. I might have cried if that name hadn't been so incongruous.

The clock on the dashboard said midnight. Jeff would be worried, I knew. We weren't used to these sudden Florida storms, and this was the first night I'd been out alone since we moved.

I gunned the motor once more. Nothing happened. I turned off the lights and the ignition and sat listening to the pounding rain.

The Fairweathers hadn't gone to bed. At least, there was a dim light vaguely visible about fifty yard back through the trees to my right. I waited as long as I dared, but the rain didn't seem to let up, so at last, I slipped off my shoes and threw open the door with the idea of making a mad dash for the house.

This was another shock. Finding myself ankle deep in water all the way, I simply gave up and sloshed through the down-pour at what I hoped was a safe pace.

All this for a bridge game, I thought. I hadn't even had good cards!

I'd met Kitty Martin at my first PTA meeting, and she'd invited me to fill in at her bridge club. At the time, it had seemed like a nice idea, and a way to meet some people. But at the time, I had never seen a Florida storm!

Standing at the front door of Gerard Fairweather's house and matching my finger to the button of his door bell, I wondered why Jeff and I had chosen to buy a house at the far end of Sandcastle Key. I had already driven five miles out from Kitty's house on the mainland and still had a good two miles to go to get home when I had ended up bogged down in the wet sand of the Fairweather front yard. Muttering a few very unlady-like

words to myself, I pushed the button again.

The door opened, and a tall, slender, formidable-looking man stood looking down at me.

"Mr. Fairweather?" I said. "My name is Gail Bartman. I live down the road a ways. I'm awfully sorry to bother you so late and on such a terrible night, but I'm afraid I've hit your mailbox and got my car stuck in your yard."

"Oh?" He raised his eyes as if to look beyond me, but the night was too dark and too wet, and he looked down at me again.

"Come in," he said, stepping back.

"I'm dripping wet," I said. It was the understatement of the week. "I just thought that if you'd call my husband for me."

"Well, you can't stand out there!" the man said. "What's your husband going to do for you, anyway?"

I really wasn't sure. We only had one car, Jeff was sitting with the children, and we didn't know our neighbors well enough to start asking them for favors on such a night.

I opened my mouth, then closed it and stepped inside because I didn't have any better ideas.

Mr Fairweather showed up a little better in the light of the living room. He was still big, but he wasn't quite so frightening,

and, once the door was closed behind me, his voice softened and became almost gentle.

"Won't you sit down?" he said. "Would you like a cup of tea? A drink? I have almost anything."

"No, please. Don't bother. If I could just use your telephone —"

"Of course, you can," he said. "A pretty little thing like you — but I'm expecting a call just now. You won't mind waiting, will you?"

A call? At ten minutes past midnight?

My skepticism must have shown on my face because he hurried on with an explanation of sorts.

"My wife," he said. "Surely, you understand my concern?"

Desperately, I began to wish that I had chosen another house, but there was no way now to make a graceful exit. Gerard Fairweather had already stepped back another pace or two and was holding out a hand in what seemed to be a genuinely hospitable gesture. With a sinking feeling around the edge of my

heart, I stepped gingerly across the worn carpeting and sat meekly on the edge of a plastic chair.

"Oh, you can't hurt anything here," he said.

I looked around and realized that he was absolutely right. Nothing in view could possibly be hurt by a little water. Most things would probably be helped.

The room wasn't really so small, I guess, but it was so cluttered that it seemed that way. Stacks of old newspapers and magazines were piled high on every available surface — chairs, foot stools, coffee tables and benches. Ash trays almost flowed over, and the furniture, although it had once been of quality, was thoroughly sagged and frayed. Only one lamp was lighted, and the walls, which were paneled in a dark and dusty-looking wood, seemed to be pushing in at my shoulders.

I tried vainly to think of something clever to say. A large grandfather clock ticked off time in the corner. The rain pecked at the windows. The telephone sat silent on top of a cluttered old desk on the far side of the room. Suddenly, a chill ran through me, and I shivered involuntarily.

"You must be cold!"

Gerard Fairweather was on his feet, pulling a blanket off the couch and draping it around me. His fingers were long and very white, and his face was too close to mine. I shivered again quite violently.

"I'm sorry you're so uncomfortable," he said. His teeth were old and yellow. He was perhaps sixty-five or seventy. He looked well worn, but neither poor nor shabby. In fact, his clothes were expensive and fairly new — slacks, shirt and tie all in co-ordinating greens.

I looked longingly at the phone. "It would only take me a minute to call my husband." I said.

"It won't be long now," he told me. He sat down opposite me and placed his elbows on his knees. There was a long silence, and then he leaned back in his chair and cleared his throat, as if he had made an extremely difficult decision.

"My wife is an alcoholic," he said.

"Oh?" I fished for, but couldn't find, an appropriate comment, and so I said nothing more. I probably squirmed a little, though, and looked longingly at the phone once more.

"Every once in a while," he went on, "she goes on a binge. She goes into the city and checks into one of the most expensive hotels and telephones everyone she knows, long distance."

He paused, but there seemed nothing for me to say.

"I always told her," he said, "that when she died, I was going to bury a telephone with her."

A chill went up my spine.

"Sometimes, she's gone for a week. But when she's had enough, she calls me, and I drive in and bail her out."

The silence was so heavy I could feel it.

"If she should call tonight and get a busy signal, she'd think I was checking on her."

"And she'd object to that?"

"Oh, very strenuously."

"But I might be here a week!" I blurted.

"No! No, I'm sure she'll call tonight!"

I stood up. "Please! Just let me go find another neighbor." The man was crazy. I had to get out of there.

The telephone rang before I reached the door.

"Hello?" I heard him say. "Yes. Yes, darling. Where? All right. Of course I will. It shouldn't take more than an hour."

He hung up and spun around with the agility of a thirty-year-old.

"Go ahead and use the phone," he said. "When you leave, just close the door behind you."

"But —"

This was ridiculous. Before I could argue with him, he was out the door and moving rapidly toward a little MG I had noticed parked in the driveway, facing out toward the road.

"Just close the door behind you," he shouted, waving a hand at me.

The rain had slackened some, but it was still coming down rather heavily, muffling the sound of the car door as it opened and closed. The motor roared to life, the headlights went on, the little car shot forward.

The driveway wasn't really long, and it seems incredible that he could have got to such a speed by the time he got to the end of it. However, it seems even more incredible that he didn't realize that the road would be slippery, that he would, going that fast, slam on his brakes as he hit the pavement.

I heard the crash, and my mind didn't stop to question what had happened. I raced for the phone, snatched it off the hook and told the operator there'd been an accident.

"Get the sheriff," I shouted. "Call an ambulance!" I gave her the name and address, and then I ran out into the night and started splashing my way down the driveway.

The little car was on the opposite side of the road, turned over on its top. The wheels were still spinning. The cloth top was crushed in so badly that I was

absolutely helpless to do anything.

The sheriff's car arrived a few minutes later, and a young deputy got down on his hands and knees and managed to work the door on the driver's side open. He crawled part way inside, then backed out again, shaking his head as he struggled back onto his feet.

"Gerard Fairweather," I said. "He was going to get his wife."

He turned and looked at me blankly.

"She called. From some place in the city."

"She called?" he asked me.

I nodded. "He was just telling me — she loved to call long distance."

"If she called," the deputy said, "it was certainly long distance."

"You mean she —" I stammered. "And did — did he —" I couldn't finish.

It was the deputy's turn to nod.

"She did," he said soberly, "and he did. He buried her this morning complete with the telephone. I know. I escorted the funeral procession."

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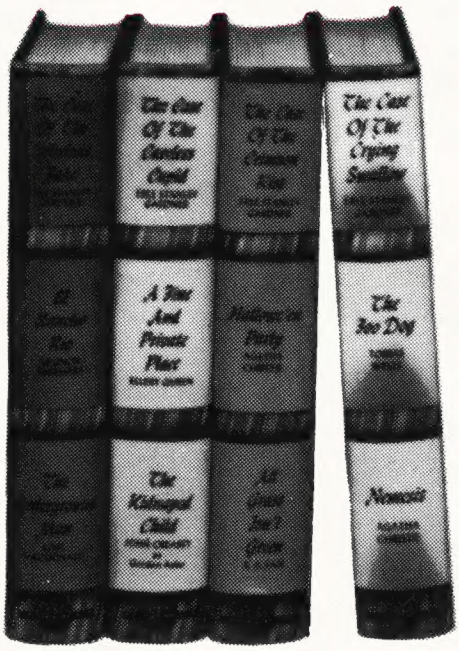

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